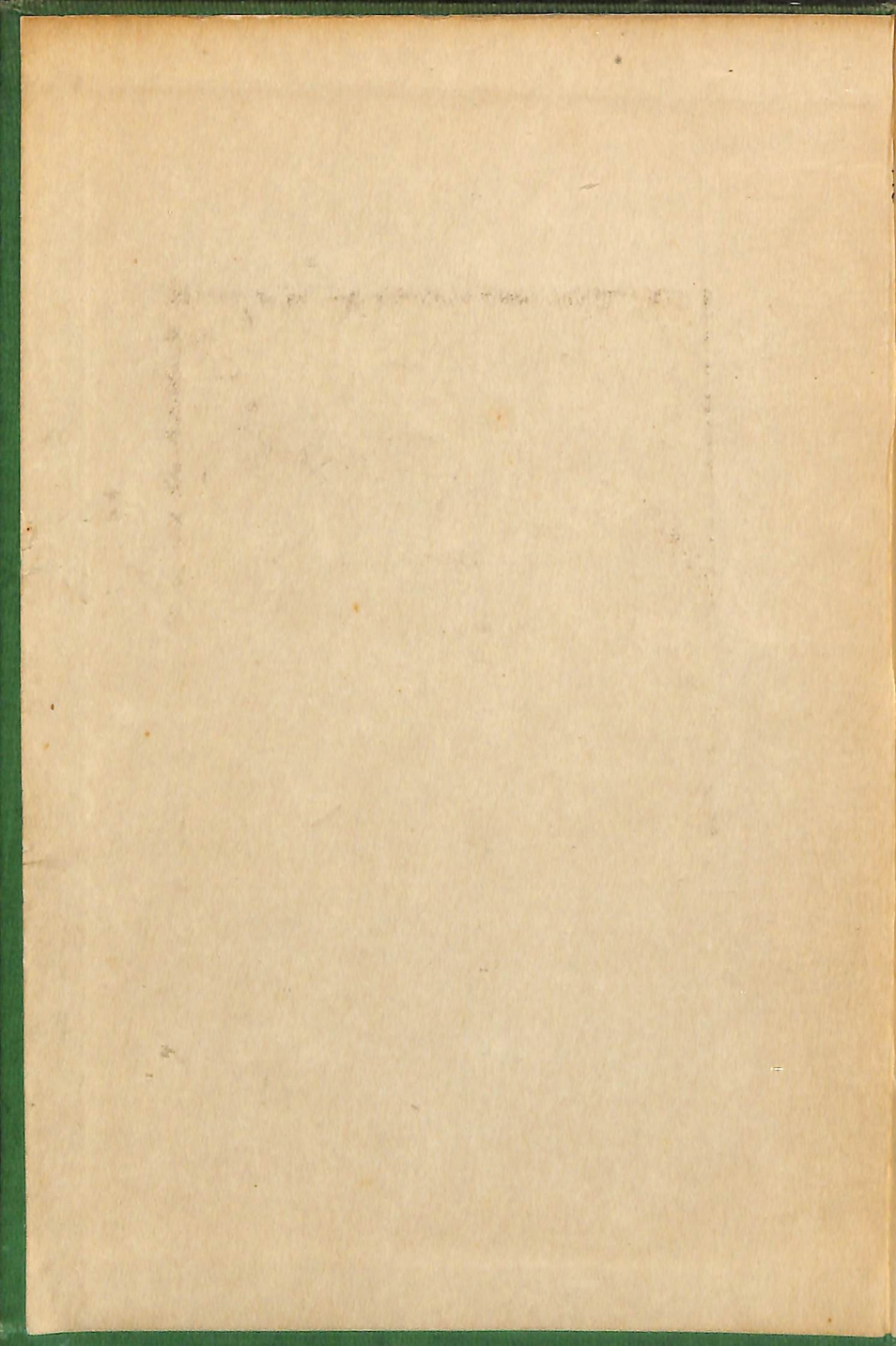


The
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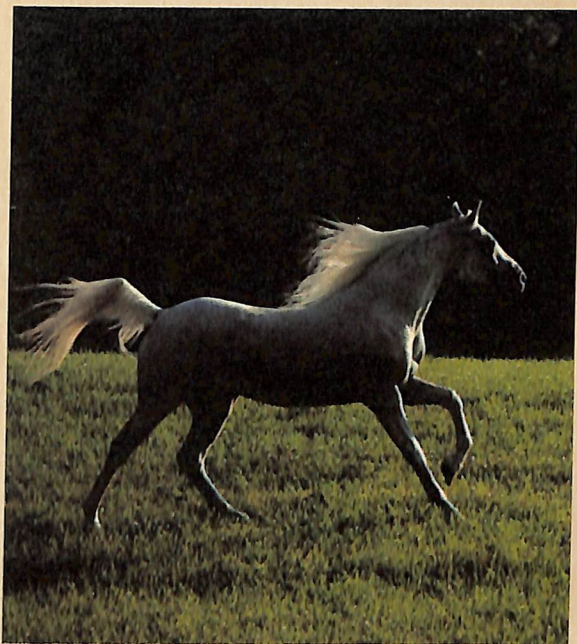
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THIS BOOK BELONGS TO

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THE SILENT HOUSE

The
S I L E N T
H O U S E

By
JOHN G. BRANDON
Author of "The Joy Ride," Etc.



LINCOLN MAC VEAGH
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“For ways that are dark
And tricks that are vain,
The Heathen Chineese is peculiar.”

BRET HARTE

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BOOK THE FIRST

DEFILEMENT

CHAPTER I

EAST GOES EAST

ALDGATE upon a Saturday night—the Orient of London.

Along Aldgate itself, through Whitechapel High Street and that long, wide artery, the Mile End Road, the crowds teem; youth and age, rich and poor, Christian and Jew; and lower down, from the forest of shipping berthed at the East, and West India Docks, Millwall, and even as far up as St. Kitts by the Tower, sons of every race and clime add to the cosmopolitan scene. But, far outnumbering all others, the people of the Chosen dominate; for here is the heart of the *Ghetto*—the New Jerusalem of the Western World.

Swarthy-skinned, keen-eyed men, alert, active, quick of movement and gesture. Soft-eyed, olive-skinned, full-breasted women, in whom the original mark of their old Oriental forebears repeats itself with strange persistence. Aged grey-beards thread their way along, any one of whom might stand as model for one of the ancient Priests of the Temple, so little has the race changed its characteristics through thousands of years.

Vivid colour, keen and noisy bargaining, the Babel-like chatter of every dialect of Yiddish, from the expatriate from Russia, to those of the Moorish-tinged from Mediterranean-Africa. It is all a bazaar of the Orient rather than a paved, guttered and tramway thoroughfare of London.

Here and there, mostly in pairs and chattering in rapid yet monotonous intoning, there sluttered along, ridiculous in slop-made Western tailoring, with pig-tails dangling from cheap bowler hats, true almond-eyed sons of the East—cooks and kitchen-servants for the most part, of shipping from sunny waters; though among them could be seen more sophisticated brethren—business men, and others, from Pennyfields and the purlieus off Limehouse Causeway. Stolid, immobile faces which never, be their owners ever so voluble, seemed to change expression—save, perhaps, when their slant eyes fell upon some passing white female of more than usually opulent charms.

But upon this night there was another, and different type of their race among the observers of the kaleidoscopic scene; and perhaps the only soul in that great street to be there in the spirit of grave inquiry. A young man this, tall, remarkably upright and dignified in carriage, with a lean, aquiline-nosed face almost ascetic in its severity of line. Yet when the veil of inscrutability lifted, as occasionally it did, from his dark, slightly oblique eyes, there was a philosophic humour to be discerned in them—the humour of a thinking Oriental to whom this Occidental civilization of ours is one vast, insoluble riddle.

That he was a person of consequence was plain even to the meanest intelligence. Apart from a natural air of command, the very clothes he wore, the immaculate grooming of his person stamped him indelibly as a man of rank, wealth, and possibly power in his own country. There was that about him to suggest that he was not altogether insignificant in this.

For some time he stood upon the corner of the High Street and Commercial Street, where perhaps the moving

throng was at its thickest, apparently totally oblivious of the fact that he was drawing no little attention to himself. More than one keen, glittering, and furtive eye ran over him appraisingly; more than one soft, heavy-lidded one with burning fervour in its glance, met his in frank invitation. But in those inscrutable orbs of his there showed no gleam of response; and, indignantly, the solicitous one passed on about her wretched trade. Whatever he thought, whatever the confusion of ideas the strange customs of this great human hive of the East-end might have created in his mind, the young Mandarin Chan-fu permitted no trace of them to appear upon his handsome, sphinx-like features.

Suddenly a voice, a husky, entirely diffident voice, sounded quietly in his ear from behind.

"Beg pardon, guv'nor . . ."

He turned, to find himself confronting a huge man of most unprepossessing appearance, though completely impressive in other, and more dubious ways. A man of perhaps thirty, with a misshapen nose, and one huge, bulbous, and wonderfully serrated ear, a large, flat face upon which were plainly visible many and permanent marks of battle, a huge prognathous jaw and, generally, all the earmarks of a person to be given a remarkably wide berth. But it may have been that the unblinking eyes of Chan-fu penetrated deeper than the outer husk, for, after a long searching look into the steady blue ones of his accoster, he smiled pleasantly and invitingly.

"You wish to speak to me?" he inquired in perfect English.

"Well—er,"—the deferential tone of the burly speaker became even more intensified—"I—er—I seen you standin' 'ere guv'nor, lookin' at the sights, as y' might say,

and—er—well, anybody can see you're a toff as don't know these parts."

Chan-fu smiled.

"A gentleman of perspicacity," he observed. "I am an entire stranger here. Well?"

"Well—er,"—the man moved nearer, his husky voice dropping to a whisper—"there's some pretty tough nuts around here, guv'nor, and one or two of 'em's been givin' you an eye-over. I thought if you was wantin' t' 'ave a look round, y' might give a straight bloke t' show y' sun-nink: a bloke as can play the dooks-up game with the next. They'll try no 'anky with 'Badger' 'Awkins lookin' arter y', guv'nor; and if there's anybody can show y' more'n I can abart 'ere, I'll eat my tit-for-tat."

Grave and speculative were the eyes which regarded him.

"Which really means that you do not consider me a person capable of defending myself?"

Thick, muscular fingers cocked a bowler hat to one side and scratched dubiously in close-cropped hair a moment.

"Why as to that, guv'nor," responded Mr. Hawkins, "that's a game as nobody can be sure about. I've fought men in the ring as I'd laughed at outside, and they came near beatin' me. Others I reckoned would be tough jobs, and I've beat 'em in a couple o' punches. But this 'ere *is* a cert; a bloke can 'ave the 'eart of a lion, but let 'im nap a clout on the nut with a cosh, and down 'e goes. What's more 'e stops down a bit. And what's more'n that, when 'e *do* get up, 'e'll find 'e ain't got the price of a cab t' the 'orspital left on 'im. So 'ow do I go t' earn a honest dollar showin' you around a bit? I put it to y' man t' man—I should say: man t' gent."

For one tiny fraction of time that veil of inscrutability

lifted from Chan-fu's eyes, their dark depths lit with a twinkle of amusement.

"You have no work to do," he inquired politely, "that you would spare me your valuable time?"

"Work!" Mr. Hawkins drew his burly frame up. "It's like this 'ere, guv'nor. I'm too old for the boxin' game now, though I don't mind sayin' that on the cobbles I'll beat any three east of Aldgate Pump. So I do a bit o' racin' t' keep the pot boilin'. But y' know 'ow it is in the winter, when they're at the over-th'-sticks game. It's wicked—blimey, but it is. So a bloke 'as to do what 'e can t' earn a Oxford-scholar when 'e can."

"An Oxford scholar? That is strange. I am an Oxford scholar."

"Badger" Hawkins hastened to translate.

"It's English for a dollar, guv'nor. Five shillin's. But take it as a tip that I'm the bloke to travel round with you t' night. It'll be backin' a odds-on fav'rite."

Chan-fu's lips parted in a curious smile.

"Very well," he agreed. "You give me your time and knowledge, and in return I give you five shillings. If you are very interesting—perhaps ten."

Mr. Hawkins jammed his hat tight upon his huge, bullet-head.

"Guv'nor," he asseverated with complete finality, "you're a bleedin' toff, and I knew you was the minute I clapped eyes on y'. And now, bein' a Chineese gent, if it's to your likin' to take a squint down Chinatown, we'll . . ."

Chan-fu lifted an amber-coloured and perfectly manicured hand.

"And why," he asked, "should you think I would cross the world to study Chinamen?"

"Spoke like the book," agreed Mr. Hawkins instantly.

"Well, if it's *schonks* as you're interested in, we'll nip through into Shoreditch. There's better samples round there. These is only the Flash Ikes and Rougy Ruths bat-terin' up and down 'ere."

"I think," said Chan-fu, "we will stay here a few moments. There are things here which interest me—perhaps you can explain them . . . Mr. . . . er?"

"'Awkins," imparted that gentleman. "'Badger' 'Awkins, ex-light 'eavyweight champeen o' England. That's my monniker, guv'nor."

"Thank you. Mine is Chan-fu."

Mr. Hawkins inclined his horribly disfigured ear towards the speaker.

"Come agen?" he requested politely.

"Chan-fu."

"Right, guv'nor. Sounds a bit o' class abart it—not like these 'ere Willie 'Op Ling an' Charlie Ah Soo blokes down the Causeway. Now what was it you had in mind to ask, guv'nor?"

The penetrating oblique eyes turned along the wide, brightly lit pavement of the Whitechapel Road. Coming towards them was a girl of not more than seventeen years, her bright, impudent little face thick with paint, her fine, bold eyes surrounded by black smudges from her lashes, her full lips as though cut from the heart of a ripe pomegranate. Long, beautifully-moulded, silk-clad legs showed two inches above her rounded knees, and the flimsy material of a wondrously abbreviated skirt, held tight against her by a sharp, biting wind, showed her form as clearly as though she stood upon a model-throne. The upper part of her frock, equally scant, and sleeveless, revealed her firm, rounded breasts as though they were marble with a flimsy covering. They swayed from side to side with every

mincing step she made in tawdry, ridiculously high-heeled shoes.

Mr. Hawkins, following the glances of his new-found hirer, gazed upon this engaging specimen of femininity with open mouth.

"Why," asked Chan-fu puzzledly, "do your Occidental women wear no clothes—even in winter—Hawkins?"

"Because they ain't 'appy less they're showin' all they got," informed Mr. Hawkins with complete conviction. "But this 'ere piece ain't a accidental woman, guv'nor—she's a Yid. And, don't forget, them's silk stockin's she's got on, not 'er bare legs, like y' might think."

The girl passed them, swaying forward upon the high heels; every muscle of her lithe, vital young body rippling palpably beneath her tightly-fitting frock. Of underclothing one could have conceived her to be entirely innocent.

"Some women," mused Chan-fu aloud, "have a talent for looking naked in full dress. They make you feel that their clothes are just a veil a man's eyes are meant to penetrate."

"Y' could see through that there Lizzie's clobber with motor-goggles on," was Mr. Hawkins' comment. "Though, mind y', guv'nor, when y' look at it fair doos, it's about all the pleasure they get, streelin' up an' down 'ere, pickin' up some bloke who'll stand 'em to the pitchers, or a fish supper at Isaac's. They looks flash enough Sat'dy night an' Sundays, but most of 'em slaves all day at the machine in *schonk* sweat shops t' get their bits o' rags t' turn out in." He turned a humorous eye upon Chan-fu. "It's agen humian nature, guv'nor, when a girl's slaved a fortnit t' make 'arf a bar for a pair o' silk stockin's, for 'er not to show nine and a tanner's worth of 'em. Now I

puts it to y', man t' man—er—man t' gent, like I said afore."

Again the faintest twitch showed at the corners of young Chan-fu's mouth, but the eyes he turned upon this philosopher of the streets were entirely grave, wholly impassive.

"An observer of people and things, I see," he said. "A watcher of your fellow-man, Hawkins."

"And some of 'em takes a bit of watchin', I'll tell y'," that gentleman informed him profoundly. "Not 'arf they don't! An' you're just in the neighbour'ood where the biggest micryscope y' can lay holt of t' watch 'em with, ain't none too strong. And women as well! Bleedin' eels *they* are, when they're on the crook. Blimey! How abart takin' a mooch down Shoreditch, Guv'nor?"

And so they progressed, to a running accompaniment of lurid narrative. It was, presumably, personal experiences of his *courier's* chequered existence, and punctuated by observations upon human motives and aims and ends of so searching and, in general, condemnatory a character that often that transient twitch appeared at the corner of Chan-fu's mouth. From streets of garish light to slums of incredible foulness; back again to others equally bright, but always to turn again into black alleys where crime flourished, and disease batted upon half-starved, semi-naked wretches, to whom death must eventually have brought welcome release.

At the corner of one such dreadful alley, Chan-fu turned and looked back.

"Money," he said sombrely, "is guilty of many crimes, Hawkins. In your country as well as in mine."

"Yus," responded the informative "Badger"; "on'y they don't put it in 'stir' for c'mitten' 'em. Fr'm what I

can see of it, guv'nor, money makes the biggest noise in this 'ere world—I wish I 'ad enough of it t' send me deaf."

A woman, a dishevelled, screaming-drunk harridan, reeled across their path cursing them vitriolically as she stumbled towards one of the dark, deserted-looking dens of which the street was composed. A terrible, a tragic figure. "Oh, that man should put an enemy into his mouth," quoted the Chinaman softly. "Do you drink, Hawkins?" he asked casually, as they moved along.

"When I can git it," answered Mr. Hawkins frankly. "But eatin's my best 'obby. I've known a few times though, when the 'obby went back on me."

"You've starved?"

"I'm a c'nosser on it. Dam' near got starved into marryin' a woman once. If it 'adn't been that me and a pal done a job—I sh'ud say got a bit o' work, nothink would of saved me. That was the on'y skirt ever I 'ad anythink t' do with, but she was plenty an' too much."

The slanting eyes surveyed him thoughtfully.

"She was not then the object of your love—as you Occidentals amusingly put it."

Mr. Hawkins made a sound expressive of deep disgust.

"'Er! Not on y'r life, guv'nor! She was a objec' all right. Blimey! She was the champeen weeper of the world, I'll take me oath. When I went t' see 'er, she started 'owlin' an' kep' it up till I went. If I tried makin' love to 'er, you know, t' kid 'er a bit, she wep'; if I never, she wep' worse. If I give 'er a present she'd flood it; if I never, she'd bawl jus' the same. If I borrered a bob or two off her t' battle along with, she soaked it well before she give it to me; if I payed it back, she cried fit t' break 'er 'eart. It 'ud never o' surprised me t' 'ear, after I done a bunk

for good an' all, that she'd drowned 'erself in 'er own eye-juice. No more women f'r 'Badger' 'Awkins!"

It was after they had again crossed the Shoreditch High Street and turned into a labyrinth of small, scarce-lighted streets, that Hawkins stopped suddenly and stood listening keenly. With his great gnarled hand he drew Chan-fu into the shadow of a wall.

"Guv'nor," he whispered, "'ear anythink?"

"Yes," the Chinaman told him calmly. "Men's footsteps. They have been following us for some time."

Hawkins gave a muttered curse.

"I wish I 'ad of," he growled worriedly. "I was a dam'd mug t' bring you in 'ere. I might a' knew!"

Chan-fu looked at him steadily.

"Have known—what?"

But the other did not answer immediately. Instead, his eyes, shaded by his hand, were searching the black opening of the alley in which they stood.

"I wish t' Gawd I knew 'ow many 'anded they are," he snarled.

Chan-fu smiled in the darkness.

"If you mean the men who have been following us this half hour or more," he said easily. "Seven. Do they matter?"

Hawkins drew a long, whistling breath.

"Matter," he echoed. "They do *that*, guv'nor. An' t' think o' me bein' supposed to look arter you, an' you knowin' all the time they've bin tailin' us up, and me never spotted nothink wrong till a minute ago. 'Red' Mullarky's lot—seven 'anded." He groaned.

"What are they—footpads?"

"Worse'n that, guv'nor. Real, right, straight-out 'ammer men. I oughter knew when I seen Mullarky eyein'

you on that corner, that if y' stopped down 'ere he'd put 'is gang on t' skin y' out. Seven 'anded!" He stopped: Chan-fu watching the big disfigured face knew that its owner was thinking furiously.

"Seven to two," he remarked casually. "Well there have been worse odds than that, my friend."

"The on'y kind of fightin' you're used to—p'raps. You don't know these kind o' swine, guv'nor. A broken bottle jabbed into y'r face is the way they start. Once y' go off your feet—the boot. Look 'ere, we're in a blind alley. They can't get behind us. Let me go towards 'em and start a rough'ouse. Everyone I 'it'll go down, y' can bet on that. When I'm well at it, you duck the other side of the alley and make for the street, top-speed. Y' look like y' might be able t' sprint a bit."

"Like a deer," Chan-fu assured him smilingly.

"Then by cripes, you 'op it like one. And whatever y' do, watch none of 'em sticks out a foot as y' go by and trips y'. It'll be good night Nurse, if they do. If y' can get past, I'll stick it till you're clear away. Never mind th' dollar. You're a good sport—even if y'are a Chink. I'll go and meet 'em—be ready t' go f'r y'r life!"

He moved sturdily in the direction from which, by now, whispering voices could be plainly heard; his great jaw thrust out, the look of a savage fighting-dog upon his horrific face. Then Chan-fu laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"Stop," he ordered in a quiet tone of command. "You think, my big Hawkins, that I am helpless in a thing of this kind? That I, Chan-fu, the son of the Illustrious Warrior, the Mandarin Chan-fu, I who have been trained in the great School of the Swordsmen and Wrestlers, cannot deal with these street-pirates—these foul scum of the gutters of your city? I, the son of a line of fighters; fatal-

ists to whom death matters nothing—I, to leave you to fight my battles, while I run like a coward!”

“F'r Gawd sake, guv'nor,” the big man pleaded, “git *ah*t of it. Never mind abart warriors an' sich, they ain't 'ad 'Red' Mullarky's sort to deal with. *Git ah*t of it—while y' can.”

For answer Chan-fu laughed—a strange, mirthless sound that made the other glance at him quickly. Then, without further words, he walked calmly in the direction that the gangsters were stealthily moving from.

“Come, Mr. 'Red' Mullarky,” he called in a soft, velvety voice, “I have a lesson to teach you. One, by the Joss of my father, that you will never forget.”

A curse, a quick patter of feet, and they came. In the darkness one man gave a low, tortured cry. Hawkins—charging in, smashing right and left with all the power of his bull-like frame—knew that man to be 'Red' Mullarky. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the young Chinaman shoot a lean, sinewy, open hand into the face of another of the roughs, twist it suddenly, then the man, clutching at his eyes, staggered blindly away. Against the wall by which he fought with a mad ferocity, Hawkins heard a man—a man with a sobbing, panting breath, break a bottle—Mullarky!

“Look out for glass, guv'nor,” he panted, and, three of them battling at him, strove to get towards the man crouching against the wall, that terrible weapon poised—waiting.

“Fight a fair fight, Mullarky, dam' yer,” he shouted at him.

“When this job's done, I'll cut your guts out, you *nark*!” was the answer hissed back at him.

Suddenly one of his three assailants dropped—suddenly, silently as though pithed. That strange laugh that he had heard from Chan-fu floated to his pulsating ears. In one glance he got into the Chinaman's eyes, he saw what appalled him. They were a-glitter with a dark and bloody cruelty such as he had never seen before. Then, with equal suddenness the second dropped. The third, with a gasp turned and ran—ran like a mad thing. Chan-fu darted after him.

Against the wall Mullarky moved slightly from his crouching position—his wicked, bloodshot eyes met those of the ex-fighting man. One second they glared at each other, then, raising himself imperceptibly upon his toes, Hawkins, with a grunt, brought his own fist up with every ounce of his strength behind it. It took the other beneath his ear with the cold, clear clap of bone against bone, the jagged bottle fell from nerveless fingers, and "Red" Mullarky went down on the back of his skull upon the stones with the dull impact of a thing already lifeless.

"Mullarky's down," a whining voice cried. It came from a man struggling to his feet. "Don't hit, Hawkins," he appealed, "we've had enough. If you bring the cops in before we get him away, every gang in the East'll fix y'."

"Take him away," said Hawkins, breathing hard. "I never started it."

The other dragged his leader to a sitting posture, but his arms hung slack, the hands loosely upon the ground.

"Come on, 'Red,'" he urged. "Time to get out of it. We've struck a snag and that's all about it! Shift y'self!"

But there was no movement from the stricken gang-boss, save that the red head from which doubtless he de-

rived his nick-name, rolled loosely with a strange, a fantastic motion, across his chest. The man knelt quickly and peered into the staring, sightless eyes; then laid him back upon the pavement with a shiver.

"*He's dead*," he uttered in a chilled awed whisper. "'Awkins, you've croaked 'im. You done it!"

A steely hand gripped him by the collar in an inextricable grasp.

"And you breathe one word of to-night's work, and I will swear in your courts that I saw your gang do it," came in cold, incisive words from Chan-fu. "And I will be listened to—and *believed*," he added menacingly.

"Nobody'll breathe a word, guv'nor," the trembling wretch he held assured him. "By Gawd, not likely! It's nanty on this job—nobody knows nothink!"

"So much the safer for them," was the laconic answer.

Released, the man disappeared instantly into the shadows, and was gone after his fellows like a flash. Along the alley he stumbled upon a writhing body.

"Gimme a hand out o' this," a weak voice moaned. "The chow got me—I think he's done me in. Don't leave me 'ere for 'im to finish me! Gimme a hand to get t' cover."

Hawkins stood staring at the dead body like a man in a trance. "Murder!" he was muttering. "Oh, my Gawd, *murder!*"

"You have rendered society a service, Hawkins," a calm, equable voice assured him. "A service for which, in this strange country, they will most assuredly hang you if ever it comes out."

Appealing, terrified eyes turned in his direction.

"Where can I 'ide away, guv'nor? What can I do? I don't trust Mullarky's gang. The first one that's took in-

side and roughed up a bit by the cops, he'll squeal it all out as sure as we're livin'."

"I think not. Self-preservation still remains the first law of nature, Hawkins, particularly to that kind of vermin. But we will make certain. Hawkins will disappear. A Chinese gentleman studying at Oxford will acquire a new and invaluable servant. One that he can trust"—very succinctly the words came from his tongue—"to the degree of life and death."

"Get me out of this, guv'nor," the unhappy man pleaded, "and I'll serve y' faithful as a dorg. I'll do a *real* murder for y' if ever y' want me to—*so 'elp me Gawd!*"

"Some-day I may remind you of that oath, Hawkins," Chan-fu said softly.

"I'll keep it," answered the other doggedly, "if I swing for it."

It was in a fast night-train running down from Paddington to Oxford that he crept, with furtive glances about, into the first class carriage alone occupied by the completely calm and impassive Chan-fu.

"We're gittin' near there, guv'nor," he whispered hoarsely. "What name am I t' be fr'm now on?"

Chan-fu put aside the scientific book he had been reading, and looked amusedly at the now drawn and haggard face Hawkins turned upon him. Then with a slight yawn, took his watch from his pocket and glanced at it. The name upon the dial caught his attention—he held it towards the man watching him so anxiously.

"There it is—provided for us," he said. "Benson; a most excellent name. And I hope you will prove as trustworthy a servant as I have proved this Benson to be."

"I told y' t'night," the other whispered fervidly, "an' I'll stick by it."

Chan-fu nodded slowly and smiled that long, inscrutable smile.

"What is to be, *will* be, Benson. You may depend upon that."

CHAPTER II

THE HOUSE AT OXFORD

IT was a strange life into which the ex-brusier, ex-race-course thug (for the status of "Badger" Hawkins in the "Sport of Kings" had been little better) entered in the venerable university town. Strangely enough he seemed to assimilate into it with peculiar easiness. In one month the staid front presented by Joseph Benson, personal factotum to the Mandarin Chan-fu, might have been taken as a model for all time of just what such a servitor should be.

Though no human power could alter, for better or worse, the rugged, scarified features he presented to a slightly astonished 'Varsity-world, a deep transition was going on in him in every other characteristic. Quick as was the nimble-witted race-course follower to grasp at, and master externals, it was inwardly that the metamorphosis of the man was greatest.

From the voluble, ready-witted philosopher, "Badger" Hawkins, was springing a silent, taciturn, though entirely civil Joseph Benson. Alone to his master, Chan-fu, did flashes of the man he had so strangely encountered show; but not often. The reason was not far to seek.

From that cold, dark morning when he had stepped from the train at Oxford, the shadow of a grim, inexorable, and avenging Law, had hung poised, like some terrible sword of Damocles, over his head. By day, to shake

at every strange, firm tread that approached him; to start awake at night in sweating terror from a dream in which police hands had clamped, vise-like, upon his shoulder; the words of arrest ringing in his tortured ears.

To delve feverishly into every newspaper left near his twitching hands, searching for the paragraph that would prove to him the truth of that time-worn adage: *Murder will out!* To slink away, trembling in every limb, each time that some uniformed policeman in the street glanced curiously at his battered face. But nothing ever appeared concerning the murdered rough: no one ever glanced towards him, save in speculative contemplation. Either Mul-larky's gang had sealed their lips determinedly, or, he told himself to glean from the thought a grain of comfort, the police were too glad to be rid of the red-headed pest to bother as to who had done them the service of removing him. Little by little, did the self-tortured man's nerves quieten, bit by bit his confidence return. But Hawkins and the Benson who had arisen, Phoenix-like, from his ashes, were two men totally apart.

But perhaps the greatest factor in restoring his peace of mind was the calm, utterly immobile frame of mind adopted towards the tragic happenings by his master, Chan-fu. That he was well aware of the rack upon which his burly follower was stretching himself in those first weeks, there was no question of doubt: Those strange eyes of his, with their abnormal quality of penetration, saw and read everything: even, Benson knew, to the very depths of a man's innermost thoughts. More than once he had startled him by suddenly translating them into words, leaving the other aghast. But for all the strange ways of the Chinaman, for all that, to Benson's unsophisticated mind, was vague and mysterious in his acts,

one thing he knew. That this yellow man was a rock to lean upon, such as he had never before met; that where he—the older and apparently a hundred times stronger in physical brute-force—, was built of iron, this other was of hand-forged *steel*; flexible and resilient, but adamant, implacable, in both body and mind.

"Gawd 'elp anyone who has 'im after 'em for a fight to a finish," he told himself but two days after the hurried retreat from London. "Choice o' two, I'd sooner 'ave a go at a wild tiger."

That was while he was still in that strange place upon the outskirts of the town: the big house surrounded by a high-walled garden, to which a huge limousine-car driven by a Chinese chauffeur in livery had taken them.

"And where," Chan-fu had told him as they rolled along, "you will lay hidden, should there be any hue and cry. You will be as safe there as though you were in my illustrious father's palace at Yun-nan." Then he paused and searched the dejected face of the man beside him. "And as though you were under the pagoda roof of that palace, I expect implicit obedience. You may see things entirely strange to your English eyes, Benson—things to make you ponder. And at that let it stop. Remember that I am not of your people, that I belong to a civilization that was ancient thousands of years before the northern seakings fought with woaded savages for this island: before the Romans came, or Rome itself was ever thought of. Remember that the customs of my land are not your customs, your ways not my ways, your beliefs the opposite of mine, my Gods not yours. See what you may be permitted to see in silence—and keep your lips sealed."

"Guv'nor," he was assured earnestly, "all I want t' do is lay low for a while till we know how last night's job

is goin'. What you do in y'r own 'ouse has got nothink to do with me. I'm on'y too glad t' be in it, out of the way of the cops."

"Along that road," said Chan-fu serenely, "lies great wisdom."

And, indeed, before he had been many seconds under that roof the newly-christened Benson was given much to marvel at. The front door of a solid and substantial house of Queen Anne period opened by invisible hands, exposing to his staring eyes a veritable palace of Oriental gorgeousness. In two lines through the centre of a great entrance hall, knelt at least two dozen Chinese in a dark blue livery (if such it could be called) with a great white Chinese hieroglyphic upon the chest. As Chan-fu stepped across his threshold, the forehead of every man touched the ground in humble obeisance, and there remained unmoving.

One, a superior servant, gave him greeting in his native tongue. Quietly Chan-fu answered, then passed between them to where two more knelt at each side of tightly-closed, magnificently-embroidered curtains. Still in that attitude of prostration, each raised one hand and drew upon a thick, golden rope. Heavily the curtains swung open a moment and Chan-fu passed through; but in that moment the staggered onlooker caught a glimpse of such a blaze of splendour, that the hall in which he stood seemed dingy, tawdry in comparison.

Uncertain what to do, he made to follow Chan-fu. When he reached the curtains, they parted slightly and a little, shrivelled old figure stepped from them. He was, in Mr. Benson's opinion, the very oldest person he had ever set eyes upon—anything up to a hundred odd years. His skin was of the colour and texture of old parchment,

wrinkled into a million tiny folds; his head completely bald, or shaven. But the slanting eyes which surveyed Benson through a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles as ancient as himself, were as keen, penetrating and inscrutable as—as those of Chan-fu himself.

"His Excellency the Lord Chan-fu is before his Joss," he uttered solemnly and in English as good as that of the man of whom he spoke. "None may approach him. Follow me!"

Silently he led Benson up one wide staircase, then another, through a perfect maze of passages, and into a long corridor.

"Nice place t' git out of in a fire," commented that person to himself, dubiously.

Nearing the end of the corridor, his aged guide opened a door, stood back and, with a gesture, invited him to enter. He did so, to find himself in a perfectly comfortable combination of bed and sitting-room. He noticed in his first glance that there was neither window nor fireplace. But there was nothing Chinese about this apartment. So little indeed that it might but yesterday have been transplanted out of a Tottenham Court Road shop-window—lock, stock and barrel. The room was lit by electric light.

"This looks a bit more like 'ome to me," Benson commented pleasantly.

"I am glad that it pleases," returned the old man. "Immediately upon knowing my lord Chan-fu's wishes last night, I had it prepared for you."

Benson stared at him in amazement.

"Last night," he repeated perplexedly. "F'r me! But 'e never sent no wire last night. Couldn't 'ave—too late. An' I'll take me oath he never 'phoned, because I was with 'im all the time."

"You will stay here," the ancient continued, ignoring the interruption, "until my lord sends for you. Food—English food—will be brought to you at once. Then rest, until you are wanted." His hand upon the door he turned and scrutinized the big man closely. "There are doors in this house, to open which means death," he cautioned. "Therefore stir not from this room until His Excellency has laid his commands upon you."

Benson, sinking wearily into a chair, gave him one look which spoke eloquently of his intentions.

"I'll watch it, old un—I mean, me lord, or whatever y' are."

"I am Wo-san," the strange old figure informed him. "A priest of the Great Temple of Yun-nan." Then stole silently away.

Some minutes Benson sat there staring at the floor, his big head buried in his hands, between his eyes the deep furrow of earnest cogitation. At length he got up and, his hands stuffed deep in his pockets, peregrinated the room a few times.

"Look at it 'ow y' like, it's a knock-out," he exclaimed. "'Ow the 'ell could 'e of let the old bloke know at that time o' night? He *never* 'phoned—coudn't 'ave without me knowing. Yet that car was at the station, and old Noah has got me fixed up for, snug as a bug in a rug. It's got me beat."

In less than an hour he had eaten, divested himself of his clothes and turned into a comfortable bed. Five minutes later he was asleep—to begin the first of those terrible, haunting dreams in which a blood-stained face stared up at him from a pavement, and steely-eyed men from Bow Road Station kept shouting at him one never-ending chorus: "*Who killed 'Red' Mullarky?*"

He awoke, cold sweat dripping from his forehead, trembling violently in every limb. Got up, switched on the light, then went and lay prone upon the bed again, staring at the ceiling through aching eyes. Suddenly he rolled over and, in the clothes he had hung upon the bed-rail, searched the pockets for a cigarette. He had none. He remembered he had smoked his last in the train, to try and steady his twitching nerves. He rolled back again and lay in silent, despondent misery.

Without warning the door opened and Chan-fu entered. Behind him was a Chinese boy carrying something upon a salver. But the Chan-fu who came to him now was, in all appearance, a very different person from the man who, but a few short hours ago, was exploring dark streets and haunts of vice with him. He wore a long robe of quilted white silk, embroidered in such fashion as had never before met the eyes of the man staring at him. It covered him from his neck to his white, padded, Chinese slippers,—adding inches to his already tall stature, and making him a figure of impressive dignity. Upon his sleek black head there was a white Chinese cap, upon the top of which was a deep yellow button.

"You cannot sleep without troublesome, frightening dreams," he said quietly. "And you were searching for tobacco."

He took a box of cigarettes from the salver and placed them upon the table.

"Go," he ordered the servant. The man made deep obeisance and disappeared.

From one of his voluminous sleeves Chan-fu took a small phial and placed it beside the cigarettes.

"When you have smoked what you want," he continued, "drink this—and sleep in peace."

Then, as soundlessly as had his servant or the aged Wo-san, he disappeared from the room. And not one word had Benson uttered: just lay staring, hopelessly incredulous, until he was again alone. Springing from the bed, he broke open the cigarettes, lit one eagerly and filled his great chest with the fragrant smoke. Then sat upon the edge of the bed and drew a long, deep breath.

From somewhere in the distance a sound caught his keenly alert ears; a sound that seemed to him like a long, wailing cry. For some minutes he listened irresolute: then crept to his door, turned the handle noiselessly and peeped forth. From an octagonal skylight he had noticed at the end of the corridor as he came along, the cold, grey light of dawn was dispersing the gloom. In that light and immediately under it, he saw a motionless figure squatted, its back towards him. One of Chan-fu's men watching him, he wondered? Likely, as not. That strange wail was plain to him now—he knew it to be some kind of fiddle sobbing out an eerie, haunting melody. Suddenly a voice swelled out with it—a vibrant, throbbing contralto—the voice of a woman. Then it suddenly died out.

"One of my singing women," said an ironic voice which made Benson start wildly. It came out of the dark almost opposite to where he was listening. "Nan-sha, a very beautiful *Franco-Chinoise* half-caste girl, from Hanoi. A friend bought her for me and gave a very big price. She cannot restrain her delight at my return, even until daylight. I hope you approve her voice?"

"Bought!" The word came in a kind of gasp from Benson's lips.

"Certainly. We Chinese have different methods of obtaining our women to you Occidentals. You get most of

the bodies you desire—always excepting those whom a strangely insufficient law forces you to marry to possess—by a species of fraud, deceit and very often pure treachery you cover by that curious word 'love.' We arrange such matters differently; and, I think, more honourably. We buy them in a recognised market at a fair valuation and they are looked after properly. When they cease to charm, or amuse, we sell them again at an honest depreciation. And so they go on."

"Well, what becomes of 'em at the finish?" asked Benson fascinatedly.

"Does it matter, any more than what becomes of those of your Occidentals? With us, Benson, as with the Moslem races, women have no souls. They are merely animated machines through which we carry on the race." His voice changed from its bantering note. "I am glad, Benson, that you came no further than your door to satisfy your curiosity. My orders are generally obeyed in this house—and obeyed without question."

Something of the bull-dog in the man he had addressed flared up.

"You was foxin' me!" he declared vehemently.

Chan-fu's voice became soft as silk.

"No," he said, "there was no need. But from below you I heard you moving about and it occurred to me that, in your present state of nervous strain and agitation, the drug I gave you might not prove potent. Either that or—you might have some qualms about taking it. This door where I am standing opens to a staircase from my own suite. I had just reached it when your own door opened. I waited to see just what you proposed doing."

"I—I thought it was a kid cryin', guv'nor. I'm nervy after last night, I s'pose."

"Taken the drug?"

"No—not yet. I was just goin' t' when I 'eard that noise."

"Then do not yet. Switch on your light and put some clothes on. I will wait for you here. Bring the phial with you."

Wondering greatly, Benson slipped on shoes, coat, and trousers; then followed Chan-fu down that staircase. Upon the floor below, the latter paused and pointed out a wide, heavily-curtained doorway. Before it squatted another such figure as that one upstairs.

"Never attempt to pass through those curtains," he was warned. "I do not think you ever will, but it is fairer to make sure that you understand thoroughly."

"Is that there one of the doors the old gent told me about. The ones that there's death behind?"

Chan-fu regarded him steadily.

"Eventually," he answered with a strange inflexion, "Yes. But only—eventually. We Chinese rarely kill outright. It is the preliminaries that punish. That is what you Western peoples can never understand in our method of dealing with our worst criminals. They, like myself, are fatalists. Death means nothing. To kill is no punishment. It is by what goes *before* death that we point the moral."

From behind the curtains there rose again that sweet, low voice, and the sad wail of the instrument.

"For some things I will kill without compunction," said Chan-fu quietly. "But *eventually*—as I say. Come; I have one other thing to show you before you sleep."

Down again they descended, this time by what seemed to the big man a never-ending spiral stairway of stone steps. Before a large, square, steel door Chan-fu stopped, touched some hidden spring, and the door rolled noise-

lessly to one side; leaving, even in the growing light, a black gaping space. Upon Chan-fu's placing his hand inside the opening, it became instantly flooded with light.

"Why, blimey, guv'nor," exclaimed Benson, "it's like a chemist's shop."

"My laboratory," Chan-fu informed him, "and one of the most dangerous spots in this house of mine—but for entirely different reasons."

It was a long room, devoid of any ornamentation; the walls of which were fitted with shelves, each packed with the round glazed jars of chemistry. Two tables running the length of the room were covered with crucibles, retorts, all the paraphernalia of the earnest scientific investigator. Delicate electrical, and other instruments under glass cases, were about the place. In one corner stood a brazier, its ashes grey. In another part of the room stood a large, curiously-shaped cabinet: but from its unfinished condition, whatever it was, it was still in the experimental stage.

Chan-fu looked about him, his almond eyes ablaze with almost fanatical fire.

"And here, Benson," he said in a low, repressed voice, "you see the *brain* of Chan-fu—I could almost say the very soul. Science! The one over-mastering passion of my existence, the one thing for which I could give up, I believe, the whole world. Knowledge! To know the 'why' of all created things. We Chinese were the scientists of the world when it was young, as time is reckoned. Things just being discovered by your Western *savants*, have been known to ours for thousands of years. And many they have yet to puzzle out. The passion for scientific knowledge is in the blood of our learned men, just as the gambling fever is in our lower classes. Here I spend hours.

Nothing but this brought me here, and here I hope to make vast experiments, solve many so far insoluble mysteries. I dabble with things here, Benson, that would make most men's blood run cold even to know of. But one day . . ." He broke off abruptly and changed his subject. "Never come near here; still less set foot inside that door," he ordered sharply.

"Me!" Benson stared at him amazedly. "Now, do I look like a bloke as'ud mess abart with this 'ere kind of stuff? You couldn't get me inside of 'ere, not for a million nicker! Y' don't want no guard on this door, guv'nor, so far as I'm concerned—nor no other either, come t' that. I got enough trouble on t' suit me as it is, without any more."

Keenly, grimly, the slanting eyes fixed upon his, as though searching into his very thoughts.

"You are quite certain that it was the song you heard, and not curiosity that brought you to your door just now?"

"I've told y', ain't I?" Benson declared indignantly. "If y' don't believe me, y'll 'ave to do th' other thing."

Chan-fu gave a soft little laugh.

"You are an honest fellow, Benson, and courageous. That is why I give myself the trouble to take interest in you. And you will perhaps hear many strange noises while you are in this house; but you will also learn to repress any enterprise concerning solution of them."

He took the phial from Benson's hand and tossed it into a large iron tub filled with broken phials and other glassware. Then took one long, steady look into the weary-looking blue eyes.

"You want stronger stuff than that to-night Benson," he said, "Much stronger. But understand that I cannot

drug you from dreams every night. Too much of this would send you mad. Time must do the work."

As he spoke he was pouring rapidly from glass jars into a small glass.

"Drink that," he ordered. "Then I will see you past the guards. Without me by you they are not to be depended upon at night. They are not as tolerant of Occidentals as I am."

Benson, back in bed, lay ruminating queerly upon the company among which the Fates had flung him.

"What in Gawd's name kind of a crib 'ave I struck?" he murmured. "Doors where death's waitin' just inside for y'. A chemist's shop underneath ready t' blow y' to 'ell any minute. Women that's bought and sold like 'osses. Guards squattin' at every corner all night, and a boss that can tell what a man's thinkin' abart arf a mile away. Blimey, if the cops did come 'ere after me, blow me if I wouldn't feel sorry for 'em!"

Upon which comforting reflection he closed his eyes: it was four o'clock of the next day when he awoke from an untroubled dreamless sleep. But calm though his repose had been, his awakening had in it something of a breath-catching thrill. It seemed as though he were being drawn with great rapidity from a deep, black well. He opened his eyes to find those of Chan-fu fixed unblinkingly upon him; in them a strange, piercing gleam.

"Did—did you wake me?" he questioned dully.

But Chan-fu's only answer was a long, enigmatic smile.

CHAPTER III

EAST FACES EAST AGAIN

UPON January the fourteenth, the opening of the Lent term, the Mandarin Chan-fu and his manservant moved into 'Varsity. And yet, not altogether so. It was a strange arrangement; one which a thoroughly bewildered Benson could not for a time make head or tail of.

The sombre, oak-panelled rooms with their mellow period furniture were Chan-fu's; he, Benson, resided there permanently, but Chan-fu came only there in the day—at night the big car took him back to the house just outside the town. Nor, that Benson could see, had he personally anything to do but keep one room tidy—except for himself. For all Chan-fu's meals were brought by the car, his own Chinese servant waited upon him, then everything was taken back from whence it came. Except for his European clothes and linen and the furniture he had chosen so carefully, there was nothing whatever there of the real Chan-fu to be looked after.

In the day-time the Chinaman read and studied incessantly—insatiably; attended every possible lecture; but rarely that he did not come back without that half-contemptuous expression upon his face. At night he went back to his Mandarin's robes, his singing women, and that long, bare room wherein he spent so many hours; experimenting with things which gave Benson cold shudders

even to think of. And so things moved slowly with the nomad of Aldgate. By day, next door to alone, by night, entirely so. He stayed indoors like a hermit, battling with that ever-present fear which at that time haunted him. Once he commented plaintively upon the position to Chan-fu.

"The difficulty lies," he was told in that curious ironic tone with which the young Mandarin usually commented upon Western existence, "in that I am not constituted, mentally or physically, like you English people. As for instance, your food appalls me. To me, you eat as barbarians did; to you, doubtless I do the same. Your great bull-steaks, your weird green vegetables cooked to slop in water, the many queer, tasteless dishes you consume with relish simply sicken me. Therefore I must eat my own foods, prepared after our own customs. Ergo, I must have a house for them to be prepared in."

"What's wrong with a good beef-steak?" demanded Benson stolidly. "Beef-steak, not bull-steak."

"Called by either name, it still reminds me irresistibly of savages devouring raw meat. Then there is the profound question of my religious beliefs. To these grave seigneurs here, I am a worshipper of idols; perhaps, who knows, in the hopeless ignorance of anything but their own dogma, they consider me even a devil-worshipper. Could my Joss be brought into this place? To profane these walls from which your English religion draws the greater part of its professional priests? Oh, no. Therefore, far before myself, my Joss must have a roof under which it rests in honour." He rose, moved to the window, looking down upon a broad path where capped and gowned elders, learned pundits, walked briskly together. Slowly he studied them a moment. "And what would you think,

Benson, these gentlemen would have to say to my singing-women—Nan-sha, Lo-yen, and Ta-shen—being given shelter in the same precincts as their foolish, vapid wives, and hopelessly uninteresting daughters? As is the term in chemistry, Benson, we really are a fusion of the incompatibles. Your Kipling was wise when he wrote: 'East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet'!"

"All I know is it's a lonely game, this—nothing for a man to do."

Chan-fu eyed him in amazement.

"Nothing! Man, there are a thousand things. Why, you cannot even speak your own tongue. Set yourself to conquer it. And"—he spoke with marked emphasis—"there are worse aids to evading those police of whom you are, foolishly I think, so terrified, than a complete alteration of speech. They know of you only as one 'Badger' Hawkins, a rough with a remarkable cockney accent; they might well pass over a quiet-mannered Joseph Benson who speaks a totally different tongue."

And in this wise it was that Benson made his desperate onslaught upon his native language. With his naturally quick wit, the strides he made were amazing. His 'Yus, guv'nor', gave place to the most formal 'Yes, sir; no, sir.' The letter G, was sounded at the end of words where hitherto its place had been either usurped by a K, or dropped altogether. In the matter of the letter H he became, by dint of stubborn perseverance, entirely irreproachable, and as for adjectival embellishment, except in moments of deep stress, it became absolutely non-existent.

Singularly enough with the conquest of his old *argot*, he felt greater security; came gradually to feel that by a great effort of will he could face those who might seek

to couple his identity with that of the missing "Badger" Hawkins, with at least some slight chance of winning the day. He began to go about a little during the evenings, to mix with his fellows of the valet order; amongst whom it began to be bruited that "the Chinese Mandarin's gent, Mr. Benson, was a very gentlemanly person."

So much for iron will; for stubborn, dogged resolution.

In this manner, master and man passed through one year of existence; and, in such degrees as the inscrutable Chan-fu ever showed affection or even liking for any living thing, he showed it for his tough soldier of ill-fortune whom the Fates had flung across his path.

With money he was lavish to a degree hitherto undreamed of by his servitor. A diffident request once made for a few shillings, brought from the Mandarin's pocket a great handful of notes at which he never even glanced. From then on, his liberality was unfailing. Often Benson would find left upon the table an envelope bearing his name, to discover that it was filled with brand-new treasury notes for an amount to make him stare.

Once, upon remonstrance as to the unnecessariness of such generosity, Chan-fu leaned back in his chair and smiled gravely.

"What is money to me?" he asked. "I have plenty—too much. More than in a lifetime of the wildest prodigality I could ever spend—could ever even reduce to what you would call a great fortune. Money is the least thing in this world for me. I would not move one finger to make or take a million from another man. Unless for one thing. If to make money from me a man did me unforgivable wrong—irreparable injury. Then I would follow him to the ends of the earth to strip from him every penny he possessed. Him I would reduce to utter beggary—and

laugh at his misery. So much for that. In my father's coffers there is untold wealth. I am not poor myself. What have you?"

"Nothing," responded Benson. "Except what I've saved out of yours. But that isn't to say you haven't treated me fair enough . . ."

"Fairly enough, Benson," corrected Chan-fu precisely.

"Thank you, sir. Fairly enough without a lump like this."

"Lump? Do you consider that a lump of money, Benson?"

"Twenty-five quid! I should . . ."

"Pounds, Benson, pounds, not quids. Quids for Hawkins, perhaps, but pounds for Benson."

"Twenty-five pounds, sir. And you've gave me—"

"*Given.*"

"—*given* me more than that, one way and another, every month I've been here."

Chan-fu raised his finely pencilled brows.

"No more? I have been thoughtless. That is wage for a servant—not recompense for a companion." He drew a heavy pocket book from his breast pocket and tossed it across the table. "Take that," he said, "to add to those savings you spoke of. It is wisdom to take thought for the future, for no man may say what it holds for him."

"Do you think I'm going to take that money?" demanded Benson, a particularly stubborn expression setting into his face. Look 'ere . . ."

"The h, Benson, the h," corrected Chan-fu blandly. "Insistent little devils, those aspirates—for slipping in and out of the wrong places."

"Damn the aspirins," returned Benson stoutly. "I don't take that money."

Steadily but quite expressionlessly Chan-fu looked at him. The pupils of his fathomless eyes narrowed down to pin-points. Into his lean face there came a look of intense concentration. But he uttered no sound, nor moved so much as a muscle of his face. Gradually, into the deep-set blue eyes of the ex-bruiser there stole a look of mystification; such an expression as might a child show, upon experiencing some physical sensation never before met with in its young life. At length a heavy sigh escaped him. Still Chan-fu never moved or spoke.

"Yes, sir," said Benson suddenly, and leaning forward drew the contents from the pocket book and counted them. "Six hundred pounds, sir."

Chan-fu made no sign. Benson left the room quietly; when in a moment and with his hat in his hand he re-entered, Chan-fu, having replaced the empty pocket book, was again deep in his book. Benson picked up the Bank of England notes, put them away carefully in his pocket, and moved to the door before Chan-fu broke his silence.

"You quite understand what I wish you to do, Benson?" he asked softly.

"Yes, sir," came from Benson in a still, automatic voice. "Go to your bank and open an account for myself with this money. Give you as reference and bring the bank-book back to you."

"Exactly. Go straight there and back. I shall be waiting for you."

In precisely three quarters of an hour Benson returned, laid a new pass-book before Chan-fu, went and put his hat away, then returned to the exact place at the table where their argument had concluded. Chan-fu glanced into the book, then tossed it on to the precise spot upon the table where his pocket book had first been. Then once again he

leaned forward and fixed his eyes upon those of the man facing him. Again that long, tensely concentrated gaze, again the clouded look showed in the deep-set blue ones, and the big, rugged face twitched as though some struggle were in progress in his brain.

At length he passed a hand over his eyes and stared back at Chan-fu bedazedly.

"That's queer," he said in a strained voice, "everything seemed to go from me for a minute. What—what were we talking about, sir? I don't seem able to remember."

Chan-fu regarded him interestedly.

"Ah! A sudden *paranoia*, Benson. Quite a common thing among people who have been subjected to severe nervous strain. We were speaking of money, and I had my little joke."

"Joke? I remember about the money. I said I wouldn't take it."

"At first. But when I told you that I had opened a banking account for you—that I was very anxious indeed to know that at least acute poverty need never come your way again, you agreed to accept it."

Benson shook his head helplessly.

"Did I? I can't remember anything about it, sir."

Chan-fu pointed to the pass-book. That transient twitch at the corner of his mouth showed a moment, then disappeared.

Benson picked up the book and stared hopelessly at it.

"That's there right enough, ain't it?" he appealed.

"*Isn't.*"

"Isn't it? But as to ever setting eyes on it before . . . it's got me beat."

"I was greatly relieved at your acceptance of the money," pursued Chan-fu evenly, "because I have the feel-

ing that we may not be very long together—that very shortly I shall be called home.”

“Home!” echoed Benson in a startled voice. “Leave England, sir?”

“Leave England. I have the premonition that my father’s message of recall is upon its way—indeed, very near me.”

“You’d—you’d have to go, sir? No getting out of it anyway?”

Chan-fu slowly shook his head.

“I shall be honoured to obey my illustrious father’s commands,” he answered. “He is an old man—and at times feeble. Great, tremendous responsibilities are laid upon him which I, his son, should bear. With us, Benson, of all living things the most exalted is the father who created us, he and the never to be sufficiently venerated ancestors who went before him. If my father calls, I go—instantly.”

A heavy sigh broke from the lips of his completely dejected servant.

“I—I suppose there’s no chance of—you wouldn’t think—of—of taking me with you, sir,” he said.

“Impossible, Benson. But you will always be my care. I have never forgotten that it was through my idle curiosity you were forced into hiding; nor the courageous way you were willing to face great odds alone, to protect an utter stranger.”

“Perhaps the message won’t come, sir,” suggested Benson forlornly.

Chan-fu rose and moved to the window. For some time he stood there silently, looking down.

“Some of us, Benson,” he said with startling suddenness, “are given certain senses denied to others. Certain

faculty of mind which gives to us the power to visualize the future in some episode of existence, yet to come. The Celts call it second sight. I am one of those who see at times mind-pictures out of what is yet un-lived. Often blurred, sometimes so indistinct that only one central incident is graspable by me. And never since my earliest childhood has one of those visions failed to come to pass. Last night I saw one which concerned my illustrious father—but so dimly, so hazily that but one thing was clear to me.”

He stopped: Benson watching his face was struck by the stony rigidity of it.

“What was it that was clear, sir?”

In a still, icy voice Chan-fu answered him.

“He was murdered in cold blood. Strangled and left dead before his Joss.”

“And y’ saw the ones that did it?” Benson asked eagerly.

Chan-fu shook his head slowly.

“That was not revealed to me. But I will hear from my father before many hours. His message is near to me—very near. You will see, Benson. My premonitions never deceive me.”

Half an hour later there came a heavy knock upon the outer door. Benson, crossing the room to answer it, caught Chan-fu’s eye.

“That, Benson,” he said quietly, “is the message from my father.”

It was an Eastern cable of the Franco-Indo-China, relayed from Marseilles. Upon it, except for the address for delivery, was the one word: “Come.”

Chan-fu looked up quickly.

"Pack my clothes and be ready to leave for London with me to-night," he ordered.

"You're going to-night, sir?" stammered an utterly aghast man, upon whom a totally unexpected cataclysm had fallen. "But what about all this stuff—this furniture?"

The other glanced around him contemptuously.

"These things," he answered. "You will come back and get rid of them. If the dealer who sold them to me is not the greatest thief alive, what they will bring will swell that new banking account of yours very considerably." And then he was gone.

Before midnight that night, not one thing, animate or inanimate, of the retinue or possessions of the Mandarin Chan-fu, save that furniture he had given to Benson, was to be found in Oxford. He and all belonging to him had gone—vanished, as though Chan-fu had been some modern Aladdin who had all-powerful *genies* to work his will when he rubbed upon some wonderful magic lamp.

It was upon the deck of a great Orient liner that Benson, having carried his master's bags to the state deck-suite taken for Chan-fu at the last moment, stood by the rail, a miserable and dejected figure. A few feet away from him Chan-fu was talking earnestly with the aged priest, Wo-san. The siren for "all-ashore" shrilled piercingly its callous, immutable order.

At last he turned and came towards him—to stumble against a little girl, a dark-eyed, black-haired, elfish little figure, who, standing by the side of a foreign-looking man immaculately dressed and groomed, had been surveying the two Chinese with wide-open eyes.

Instantly Chan-fu restored her to her feet, apologizing profusely for his clumsiness.

The child, her very large eyes bulging at him, put a sudden and disconcerting question.

"If you please," she asked, "are you a *really* Chinaman?"

"S-sh, my dear," the man with her instantly reproved. "You mustn't ask questions like that!" He turned to Chan-fu and bowed. "Pardon, Excellency, but she is very young and does not understand."

"Why do you address me as Excellency?" Chan-fu asked him quietly.

"I live near Hanoi," was the answer, "and have the honour to know the Mandarin Chan-fu very well, by sight. My name is Legarde, of Winsford and Legarde. We are traders—in a small way, I am bound to confess. It is scarcely possible that our names would be known to the son of the great *Tao-toi* of the Yun-nan province."

Chan-fu bowed pleasantly, but without answering the man directly; then turned to the child. "And are you going to live in my country?" he asked her.

"Oh yes," she told him eagerly, and added: "My name is Madeline—Madeline Legarde."

"A very pretty name," he told her gravely. "And perhaps we shall talk together later on."

Bowing again, he moved along to Benson.

"Well, sir," greeted that worthy dolefully, "I suppose I shall have to be getting ashore. They're all making for the gangway. I wish"—he broke off with a lugubrious shrug—"but it's no good wishing."

"None," said Chan-fu quietly. Despite his almost savage objections, he pressed a packet into Benson's hands. "Every year until I come again the sum of five hundred pounds will be paid into your account in the bank at Oxford. Thus I shall know where to find you when I need

you. You will find my address in that packet, so that you may cable me at once should there be any need. Have no fear now of the law; all that has passed over. And now—good-bye.”

“I—I only wish that it would only come true—about your coming back and needing me, sir. You remember what I told you that night—the night of—when you took me to Oxford. Well, I’ll say it again, sir—and stick to it.”

Those strange, inscrutable eyes of the Chinaman were staring far, far out across the water.

“I *shall* come back and I shall need you. There is no uncertainty; I *know*. And dark and terrible things will draw us together. Our destinies are not yet ended together. Good-bye.”

Diffidently, Benson offered a hesitating hand.

“I’m not your class, I know,” he began, “but I’d like to shake hands with you, just, in case.”

His great fist was seized in a grip of steel.

“It was a queer business that brought us together,” he went on, “and there’s been times when I thought you were a queer sort of man. A good many when I’ve been scared of you—a thing I never thought to be of any man breathing. But you’ve been the best friend ever I’ve had in my life, or likely to have. When you want me, sent for me. I’ll be there to do what you want—whatever it is.”

Then, wrenching his hand away, he stumbled down the gangway and was lost to sight in the crowd.

CHAPTER IV

ANOTHER MAN—AND HIS SHADOW

SOME five miles above the Franco-Chinese city of Hanoi, and upon the banks of the great Son-ka, or Red River, which runs from the South China Sea far up into the mountains of Tali, stood the bungalow and, nearby, the go-down and wharf of Winsford and Legarde, Traders.

A stranger of discernment giving an appraising look over those delapidated buildings, and also the rotting bamboo wharf before the bungalow, at which a few half-naked coolies were toiling for their daily rice, would have come instantly to the conclusion that all was not well with the firm. Rather, indeed, that the affairs of Messrs. Winsford and Legarde were at a particularly low ebb.

Directing his gaze still further towards the heart of things, in the heavy, thick-set man with the sun-blackened face who lounged in a rattan chair under a slowly-moving *punkah*, and at whose hand stood a half-empty whisky bottle and a wholly empty syphon of soda, that stranger might reasonably suspect that here he saw the cause for this condition of things. In which perhaps he would not have been very far out; though most certainly the other name in the firm—Monsieur Jules Legarde—had no particular record for that strict attention to business which, we are assured, is the only dependable road to success. But the debonnaire Legarde, if he fell

somewhat short in the main essential, did at least supply the other component parts; civility and sobriety. Not by the wildest stretch of imagination could Mr. Richard Winsford be said to supply any of the three.

He was a man, to judge by the iron grey of his hair, nearing fifty; another of those square-jawed, pugnacious-looking individuals who suggest irresistibly that the roadway of their lives had been mile-stoned by violent physical struggles. A stiffly built, deep-chested man, of so tremendous a breadth of shoulder that it made his height seem less than it actually was. His arms were inordinately long, and ended with hairy and tattooed hands. Unquestionably a world-wanderer from his earliest youth, Mr. Richard Winsford.

A physiognomist would have said that the face of this man showed great contradictions. That he was bold and resolute was written in every line; also that he was not lacking in a certain sly humour. But subordinately there were other indelible indications. Beneath the low, wide forehead there was cunning, quick distrust of his fellows. At the corners of his over full-lipped mouth cold cruelty lurked, utter ruthlessness; a man this who would pay scant attention to the feelings of others—at a pinch would show scant mercy.

And also there was in his facial make up sure indication that he was a great lover of women—but in one sense only. What became of them after he had done with them would assuredly be a matter of complete indifference to him. The half-emptied whisky bottle upon the table at ten in the morning added all that was necessary to complete this Portrait of a Gentleman engaged in Chinese Trading.

Some moments his eyes dwelt moodily upon the picture

of his sweating coolies bearing rice mats up a narrow plank to a small, bluff-nosed junk with two staring eyes painted upon its bows, then he reached his hand for the bottle, poured himself a stiffish tot, picked up the syphon, looked at it, and put it down again.

His eyes turned then upon a remarkable figure squatted in a corner of the verandah, one leg cocked across the knee of the other and the cord of the *punkah* attached to one splayed big toe. With the minimum of human effort this person simply, and with the exactitude of a metronome, moved the foot of which the toe was a member, and the *punkah* swayed rhythmically to and fro, creating its blessed cooling draught. But the head of the inventor of this ingenious labour-saving device was sunk upon his chest, the breathing from his flat, broad nostrils soft and regular: apparently he was fast asleep.

Some few seconds Mr. Richard Winsford eyed this engaging spectacle, then with a grin, removed one fairly heavy slipper and hurled it with deadly precision. It smote the sleeper fairly and squarely upon the top of his small head and sent him sprawling. Mr. Winsford laughed outright.

It was an extraordinary small coolie-boy who got to his feet, though what his age might have been it was impossible to compute. He might have been twelve—or he might have been twenty; but to judge by the age-old eyes with which he regarded the humorous slipper-thrower, he might equally have been two hundred. Not that those remarkably black and narrow almond orbs showed anything but philosophic resignation; indeed, upon encountering the grin with which his master was favouring him, he returned it with one of cavernous dimensions. By his calm, equable demeanour, there was little doubt that he

was quite hardened to this form of calling his personal attention to Mr. Winsford's wants.

"You all blame tlow much plenny boot," he observed in that remarkable mixture of Chinese and pidgeon-English which, in two years of service at the bungalow, he had acquired.

"Yes. Boss throw much plenty boot, Ho-fang pull *punkah* much plenty. What d'ye mean sleeping on duty, you yellow rat! D'ye think I brought you here off the wharves of Hanoi to make a bed of the dam' place? Do you?"

It was evident that the diminutive Ho-fang was a favoured person with Richard Winsford, for to this most pertinent query he returned no answer, other than another grin of even greater dimensions. And indeed it was so. From that instant in Hanoi when he had seen this tiny starveling of the wharves fight half a dozen bigger and stronger specimens of his kind, and, in a perfect frenzy of demoniac ferocity, send them flying for their lives, he had taken a fancy to him. Something of his hard-bitten self responded to the invincible courage exhibited by the starved, half-naked little figure. He brought him back to the bungalow and installed him as his personal factotum. In return, Ho-fang made of the dissolute, hard-voiced, iron-fisted trader a deity; followed him about like a dog, and served him with the blind faithfulness of one.

Yet strangely enough he was never subservient. Where work-steeled coolies trembled before the frown of the master—never Ho-fang. He took what came his way, good or bad, with imperturbability, resented nothing, and just grinned as he was grinning now. The impish tricks that at times he carried out on others were never practised

upon him. Yet not through any fear of him. Winsford himself had been heard to say with a chuckle that he questioned if Ho-fang feared anything—God, man, or devil.

"You stand there making monkey-faces at me, and I'll alter the shape of your own for you," he threatened. "Get another syphon of soda. First pick up that slipper and put it on again."

Having restored the late weapon of attack to its proper place, Ho-fang picked up the empty syphon and moved noiselessly for an inner door. Whilst waiting his return, Winsford turned again to the coolies labouring at the water edge. A scowl passed over his face.

"Trade," he told himself, "has gone to hell. If we don't make a strike soon one way or another, the firm of Winsford and Legarde can shut up shop—that's if there's any shop left to shut. Old markets, worn out credits. Somehow or other we'll have to open up fresh ground. But *where*, the devil only knows—I don't. It's not like the old days when you could work with the *Tao-toi's*, the goods were filched from native merchants and you cut the profits. That good day has gone."

Idly, he watched a huge high-pooped junk move slowly past up the wide river to Lung-chow; her mat-sails slatting as she tacked upon her course. Upon her stern was painted a large, white Chinese hieroglyphic.

"If I had a thousandth part of the money that the old hound who owns you has," he apostrophized it, "I'd be out of this blistering hell and on a boat for England tomorrow." The idea appealed to his mood, and he cogitated it. "Though there's no one belonging to me that I know of—except a cub of a nephew whose father hated me worse than he did the devil. I shouldn't trouble *him* much.

I'd have a nice, quiet old house on the river somewhere; one of those where you're not overlooked by every curious Tom, Dick or Harry. Where a man can have a drink in his own house, without making the world any the wiser. And a man servant—men don't yap around other people's back doors. The kind of fellow that if burglars broke in, he and I would give 'em a dam'd hot time."

Ho-fang re-appeared with the syphon, placed it upon the table, returned to his corner, crossed his knee and adjusted the *punkah* cord to his toe. Slowly it began again to stir the hot, moist air.

Winsford squirting the soda into his glass eyed him.

"And you go to sleep again, you scum," he mentioned pleasantly, "and I'll send this syphon over next time."

Ho-fang grinned his eternal grin.

"All-li," he chirped sweetly; and which translation of the English words "All right," delivered in every key and intonation possible to the human larynx, constituted his usual return for every question, request, order, or threat hurled at his devoted head.

Tossing his drink off in one gulp, Winsford returned to the thought that had momentarily tickled his fancy.

"Yes," he told himself, "on the river I'd live. I've got used to water running by me all the time, and I'd miss it. If things got dull, it would serve to remind me of the good times I've had. Besides, I like the Thames; always did. Anywhere between Hammersmith and Richmond there are plenty of houses with land around them, where a man wouldn't feel mewed up in four walls. Barnes Common, that's a spot where a man could get in the open air a bit. A house on the Common, and a man could do pretty well what he'd a mind to, without a pack of top-hats-on-Sunday swines yelling blue murder."

Something in the attitude of his attendant caught his attention, silently he moved one hand down towards his heel. Instantly one beady eye cocked open at him.

"Whaffor you tlow mlore boot?" its owner demanded. "Ho-fang no sleep. Ho-fang mluch plenny can do tink."

"Oh, you were thinking, were you? And what the devil might you be thinking about?"

Ho-fang considered a moment, his face screwing itself into some amazing distortions in the process.

"All-slame I think Mlisser Legar' he go 'way long ttime—big ship. Him makem lot mluch plenny money—ha?" Winsford gave a short derisive laugh.

"If he don't come back as broke as his partner, I'll be an amazed man. What about it?"

"Him not clome back plenny money—no good, no good. Him all-slame len' Ho-fang one dollar when he clome. *Hoki.*"

"What are you going to do with a dollar?"

"Ho-fang buy big 'Melican knife—mluch plenny sharp each edge; mluch plenny stick tloo man goddam qlicq! Lil feller, Ho-fang, but all-slame plenny qlick fighter. You len' Ho-fang a dollar?" he inquired blandly.

Winsford leaned towards his importunate henchman and studied him attentively a moment. When he addressed him, it was with a succinct snap that permitted of no misunderstanding.

"The thing I'll give Ho-fang," he said explicitly, "not lend, *give*—is a nice pliable malacca where it will do him most good. Now, who the devil have you got it saved up for, you dam'd murdering little river-pirate?"

To which query Ho-fang vouchsafed no answer, but merely beamed fatuously upon the questioner.

"You no can do len' Ho-fang dollar? All-li."

"And I'll tell you something else," went on Winsford grimly, "you start any knifing tricks and you'll go before the judge—perhaps the *Tao-toi*. He'll give you the Death of a Thousand Slices, or the Dropping Water—and a few preliminary tortures just to warm you up for the real thing. That would make you squeal, you savage little rat."

Ho-fang gazed at him in complete astonishment, then shook his pig-tailed head very, very positively.

"Whaffor squeal?" he inquired. "No good squeal. Hurt nluh plenny all-slame—no good, squeal, no good. Ho-fang no squeal."

"And damn me if I believe you would!" was Richard Winsford's comment, spoken not without a note of decided admiration. He got up, stretched himself lazily, then yawned.

"Oh, curse work!" he muttered, "Curse this everlasting stew of heat, curse everything!"

Across the river from the Haiphong side, a largish *sampan* was approaching his landing steps. He studied it a moment, then from a shelf took a pair of glasses and trained them upon the frail craft and its occupants. There were two men besides the *sampan*-coolie, and one in the stern who was unquestionably a woman, heavily cloaked and veiled.

"Peroda," he exclaimed. "What's that dirty half-caste after *this* time?" By the expression upon his heavy face it was plainly evident that the man he called by that name found no particular favour in his eyes.

Nor, indeed, could it be said that the Señor Leon Peroda, as he called himself in the Portuguese fashion, found favour in the sight of many—unless persons of his own decidedly questionable kidney.

Opinions as to the origin of the Señor were many and

varied. A good many fairly involved pedigrees had been invented and put forward to account for the propagation of so much evil quality in one carcass, but nothing definite was known until the chance stumbling, by a person interested, upon a *dossier* concerning the Señor, docketed in the *Service de Sûreté* in Saigon.

This paper held that the unesteemed gentleman was the offspring of a Portuguese criminal from Macao who finished his career upon the gallows, and a half-caste Mexican-Chinese woman who had been smuggled into China, no one quite knew how. Their interesting son, grown to maturity, had been hunted out of every treaty-port on the coast by the unanimous vote of all police concerned. Later he had managed to get footing upon the Annam shore, where certain matters are regarded with rather more complacency. But officialdom of the large ports kept as tight an eye as they could upon the Señor, though he was a difficult person to pin down. A gentleman of many and varied interests, the Señor Leon Peroda—all unhallowed, and some unspeakable.

With him, Winsford saw, was a young man he called his nephew, Mateo; a youth who appeared to be taking to his uncle's several professions with a facility second only to that of his tutor.

"Now what the devil is he here for?" he repeated aloud.

A voice at his elbow answered him.

"He clome sell you more woman," declared Ho-fang amazingly. "Him no good. All-slame goddam tlief."

"You mind your own business," snapped Winsford sharply. "And the next time you as much as mention one of my women, I'll tie-you up and flay the hide off you."

Ho-fang shed his brightest beam upon him.

"All-li," he agreed cheerfully. "All-slame, Hen-tze, she no been bought. Him mluch liar. She bin stole ddown coast from Hue. Ho-fang know—Hen-tze tell him. Bimeby they find her, and get mluch plenny tlouble."

Which was no less than fact. A woman in China—outside the foreign concessions of the Treaty Ports—is an object of legal barter. But, she must consent to the transaction. Husbands can sell wives, if they agree upon the sale. Though a Chinese father can sell his daughter without consulting her in the matter. Filial obedience stands before everything; in law and out of it. But the holding of a woman against her consent, other than a daughter originally legally sold by her father, can make serious trouble for the holder—as the *Señhor Leon Peroda* was peculiarly aware.

Into Winsford's face there came quickly a look decidedly inimical to the sleek, flashy-looking gentleman approaching.

"So that's the game, is it?" he muttered. "Right. I'll teach you something, my dago friend: something you won't forget."

He went to the *chick* curtains which covered the opening into the bungalow and called: "Hen-tze!"

She came from an inner room at once, bowing before him. He eyed her steadily.

"Hen-tze," he said rapidly and in Chinese. "I have just heard that you are not an honestly-bought woman. That you are not here of your own consent. Is that true?"

She told him that it was so. That she had been kidnapped from her husband at Hue. She had tried to escape, but Peroda had threatened to torture and kill her if she did not keep silent. She was afraid that if she were sent back with him he would do as he had threatened.

"Have no fear for him," he told her. "I'll send you back myself. Keep out of the way while he is here."

With which he went as abruptly as he had entered. But before he left he took something from a cupboard. There was a suspicious bulge in the pocket of his drill jacket when he returned to the verandah. Peroda was just landing from the *sampan*.

The Portuguese, to give him some definite designation, waved a heavily be-ringed hand at him in greeting. Breathing hard with rage, Winsford conquered himself and returned the greeting affably. With an effort he even conjured up a smile.

"*Buena días*," the *Señhor* called; invariably he used the Portuguese idiom in his speech, though fairly facile in most European languages. "And how is eet we are, *amigo mio*? Ha! I have brought you som'theeng your eyes will snap at."

"This is not my day for buying luxuries," Winsford laughed. The steadiness of his voice surprised him.

The *Señhor* came up the pathway from the bamboo jetty, followed by his ill-favoured nephew. He was a sleek, oily person, *Señhor* Peroda, dapper of figure and clothing, with shining, curly-black hair and heavy-lidded, protruding fishy eyes which seemed to move very slowly towards whatever it might be they were interested in. His skin was a sallow, dirty yellow, and, taken generally, a more unpleasing person than this walking fusion of nationalities would have been difficult to find.

For all his dapperness he reminded one of some particularly undesirable species of toad, except that when he spoke, unlike the croak of the frog, his voice was soft, very sibilant, and as oily as his manner. His nephew was a younger, slighter and, if humanly possible, more objec-

tionable edition of himself. Behind them, upon tiny little sandals, the completely cloaked and veiled figure that had been in the stern of the *sampan*.

"I 'ave brought you a gem thees time, Señor," Peroda began enthusiastically. "One such as one does not often see. Bought direct from her father. Ah, a prize such as . . ."

Smiling mechanically, Winsford cut him short.

"Let her go inside and rest on the mats while we have a drink," he ordered lazily. "Women can always wait until business is through with." He held open the *chick*, and the little figure hobbled through.

The Señor favoured him with a knowing leer.

"Ah," he whispered in his oily voice, "you do not always theenk that, Señor Weensfor'."

Winsford did not answer. Instead, he turned upon Ho-fang.

"Come on, monkey," he ordered roughly. "Clean glasses—quick!"

Ho-fang vanished like a shot out of a gun.

Peroda looked after him with a gesture of disgust.

"Not for me is eet to comprehend why a man like yourself should keep that vermin for a house-boy. No."

Winsford eyed him coolly.

"I don't altogether know myself," he answered. "But I daresay I'll find out one of these fine days."

CHAPTER V

"WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT. . . ."

THE glasses were full, and what remained of Winsford's ice was upon the table in a glass bowl. Ho-fang, his black eyes kept insistently upon the woman-trader, was keeping the *punkah* moving to and fro steadily.

The Portuguese leaned over the table.

"About thees girl I 'ave bring," he began, drawling out of the corner of his mouth.

"What about her?"

"She ver' fine. But you need not pay for her—jus' yet. Plenty time when you ready."

"Thanks," Winsford answered laconically. "But I don't know that I want another. To put it straightly, I'm none too satisfied with the last I bought from you. She's a dull sort—gives me the hump." He regarded the other steadily. "Might almost fancy she hadn't been agreeable to the deal—when you bought her, I mean."

Inwardly the *Señhor* started, but he showed nothing of the qualm in his face. Simply his fingers twitched slightly and a red gleam crept into his dull eyes. He got up.

"You let me speak wit' her," he suggested persuasively. "I tell her she got to be good girl. She all right, ver' pretty."

Winsford waved him back to his seat.

"Plenty of time," he said. "Drink up."

The Senhor complied. Winsford, pouring another drink all round, saw that his eyes were upon him; covertly—speculatively. This girl was not the only thing that had brought Peroda there, he thought—there was something else back of the oily gentleman's mind. He noticed that the nephew, Mateo, kept his eyes upon those of his uncle, evidently waiting for something to out. Yes, beyond question the Portuguese had some proposition to put forward sooner or later.

Suddenly Peroda spoke; again in that soft drawl, and through the corner of his lips.

"Beesiness, it ees not good, ha? Trade ver' quiet—so?"

"Rotten," answered Winsford shortly—and waited.

"Eet get better when your partner he come back—yees?"

"Damn'd if I see how," responded Winsford bluntly. "You can't make something out of nothing."

The Senhor passed a yellow hand across his mouth and stared at the table thoughtfully.

"There's something he knows," thought Winsford. "Legarde's made some sort of a strike somehow and he's got wind of it." But he said nothing.

"That steamer you own," the Senhor put tentatively, "she could do treep—long treep—yees?"

It was Winsford's turn to stare at the wall.

"She'll do that, all right—if anyone wants to clear the debt she's seized for. Like a dam' fool, Legarde stuck her into dock to be overhauled. The slump came and we can't pay for her—so she's held."

"She ees in good condection?"

"Too blasted good. There *was* a hope she'd have sprung a plate or two before, and we could collar the insurance. Now . . ." he broke off with an eloquent shrug.

"She ees da Madeline . . . yees, I theenk."

"Correct. Legarde wanted her called after his kid. That's her—what about her?"

"The money to release her," began Peroda cautiously, "I theenk I could arrange eet. If so—you run a cargo for me? You cut in—oh, yees."

Winsford rubbed his unshaven chin thoughtfully.

"Depends what," he fenced. "*And* where to?"

"Opium," said Peroda shortly. "Down to the Farra-lones for the 'Frisco market. My agents, they peeck it up at a certain point at sea—and the sheep she coma back. Per'aps, yees, we could ar-range eet so she does not coma back . . . noo."

"What's my cut?"

The Señhor considered a moment.

"Ten per cent," he suggested.

"Go to hell," was the flat answer.

"Feeftteen?"

"Twenty."

With a deep sigh Señhor Peroda made a sign of acquiescence.

"There ees another thing," he began again after a pause.

"Thought so," grunted Winsford. "This dope is only the stringer. Well, out with it."

"Chinese girl," commenced the other slowly. "Young, prettee girl, breeng beeg price in San Francisco jus' now. The beeg merchants, they pay plentee money, good young stuff. Five, six, ten thousan' dollars . . . oh yees."

"Ah," uttered Winsford, "now we're getting at it. That's the real business. You want them run out in our tub. How are you going to get them into 'Frisco?"

"That will be for me to ar-range," Peroda told him.

Winsford, with half-shut eyes, peered again at the wall.

"How many have you got?" he demanded.

Peroda eyed him cautiously.

"All together, I per'aps ship one 'undred—per'aps one 'undred fiftee."

"*Bought* girls?" The accent was heavily marked.

The Señhor shrugged his shoulders and made a deprecating gesture with his yellow hands. His rings glittered.

"What does eet matter," he asked, "once they are out of Tonquin or Annam? Some ees paid for . . . yees." He showed white, hard-looking teeth. "Some weel be pay for, some day—per'aps."

Winsford bit upon the end of a Bornean cheroot for a minute. Inwardly he smiled quietly to himself. This rotten, greasy hound was going to pull him for a catspaw—and then twist him, as he had over the kidnapped girl, Hen-tze.

"And what do we, Winsford and Legarde, get per head?" he inquired slowly, but went on before the other could answer. "You'll have to make it good money, because my partner isn't like me. He's squeamish about some things, and he's not much of a one for taking risky chances. I'm the other way. You know it—and that's why you're here before he gets back. Another thing, there isn't another firm of owners on the Coast who would touch you with a pitchfork. They'd listen to what you've got to say—and then ring up the police. I won't; you know that too. If there's money in it, I'll do more than listen, but it's got to *be* money, Peroda—not chicken feed."

There was a short silence in which the Señhor Peroda digested this plain speaking. More than once his eyes shot a quick glance from under their heavy lids towards Wins-

ford, as though sizing up how much was bluff, and how much cold, hard fact in his intentions. The tricky brain of the Portuguese was working very rapidly just then.

"You get your sheep out of pawn," he put forward gingerly.

Winsford nodded. "And you couldn't get another to do your work in all China," he countered.

"And twentee-per-cent of the opium."

"Cheap terms," commented Winsford imperturbably. "And don't forget the charter," he added, as an afterthought, "there's got to be a charter all square and above-board for the authorities. I suppose you'll run the stuff in rice—we'll put it at ten dollars American a ton. At five hundred tons—that's a thousand pounds English—near enough. Now what about the *real* cargo, the women?"

"I pay you," began Senhor Peroda, considerably shaken by the evidence of astuteness exhibited by the Englishman, "I pay you say—one 'undred dollars a 'ead—passage monee. . . . Yeese?"

Winsford smiled: a cold, entirely derisive smile which brought no comfort to the sallow-skinned bargainer. Noting it, the nephew, Mateo, moved restlessly.

"No," said Winsford shortly, incisively, "you pay me one hundred *pounds* a head. With 'em selling at five to ten thousand in 'Frisco, that's damn'd cheap. Moreover, they're cargo—I'm not dealing in them. You pay before they *go*."

Again that red gleam came into the dull eyes of the Senhor,—but he managed to keep the surge of passion that overwhelmed him out of his face. The Englishman was a dangerous man to start on; moreover, he wanted him.

"Two 'undred an' fiftee dollars an' I pay you out of the firs' profit that comes to me."

"One hundred pounds," repeated Winsford adamantly. "And you pay me before they go on board. This is one of the few times that I'll take no chances. Please yourself." He looked with cold contempt at the younger man. "I suppose I ought to say, please yourselves," he amended. "Anyhow, that's what I mean."

Peroda and his relative consulted together in hurried, gesture-laden whispers. Winsford took no notice of them whatever. His eye, sardonically humorous in expression, roved about until it rested upon that of the diminutive Ho-fang. One black orb belonging to that young worthy closed in what was unmistakably a wink. It was expressive of his status with his lord and master that the latter returned it, and a chill smile flickered an instant about his hard mouth.

At which moment a uniformed coolie-messenger of the French Telegraphic Service of Hanoi came quickly up the steps of the verandah and laid before him a telegram.

He tore it open and, with frowning brows, read it carefully. Glancing up from the perusal, he found the eyes of uncle and nephew fixed intently upon him; the elder, indeed, had half risen in his chair, and was most unmistakably endeavouring to squint over his shoulder at the message. Winsford, swinging sharply upon him, he subsided back into his chair, murmuring something indistinctly.

"Don't try that game with me again, Peroda," Winsford snapped, an exceedingly ugly note in his voice. "Or you'll get something that won't be to your taste." He walked deliberately to the edge of the verandah and continued his reading. Again the eyes of uncle and nephew met in silent pantomimic speech: those of the equally

silent *punkah*-swinger glued upon theirs in complete comprehension.

Slowly Winsford finished his reading, despatched the coolie and, deep in frowning thought, folded the telegram and put it carefully into his pocket book. A moment he stood, his hand upon the bamboo verandah-post, staring unseeingly at the river and the small junk at his jetty.

"By God, what a chance!" he muttered. "Legarde's dropped on it this time!"

Almost like a man in a maze he turned and sunk back into his chair; in his eyes still that far-away expression of pre-occupied thought. It took two half apologetic coughs from Peroda to bring him back to his present company. When they did, his face stiffened unpleasantly.

"Well?" he demanded.

"You 'ear from Senhor Legar', your partner?" came in Peroda's silkiest accents.

"Yes."

"Ah, yees. From Singapore—yees?"

Winsford looked at him sharply.

"How did you know Legarde was in Singapore?" he questioned sharply.

The shoulders of the Portugese went up almost to his ears.

"There ees not much on thees coast I do not know," he answered in the same tone. "He stay at the 'Raffles' and he ees wit' the son of the great *Tao-toi*, Mandarin Chan-fu. Yees." The sallow face was pushed closer to Winsford's. "And he ees work to get beeg concession to trade up-river from 'ere to Yun-nan. Yees. I know, Senhor Weensfor'. There are those who watch ever'theeng for

Leon Peroda." He chuckled. "And there is thees I would tell you—that I stand een wit' you two—or there weel word go to the *old* Mandarin Chan-fu just what kind of traders ees these his son would 'ave 'eem deal wit'. You theenk then he weel let you trade up-river where there are t'ousands and t'ousands to be made? Up the Son-ka, where no white man 'as trade or even go before? Yees—no?"

His whole manner changed; there was nothing uncertain, or silky, about Señor Leon Peroda now.

"Look, Weensfor'," he said abruptly. "I find money for you to make good show. I stand een—one third. Yees? Eef not . . . you weel see. The old *Tao-toi* he ver' great man—ver' reech. You get some of 'ees monee; Legar', 'e get some of 'ees monee; but *por Dios!* I get some of 'ees money, or *no one* does. Now how ees it about the *Madeline*, an' the charter, an' the passage money for those yellow womens? *My terms*, I theenk—*yees?*"

Winsford looked at him out of eyes in which was rising slowly a murderous gleam; but he kept calm—ominously calm, anyone who knew him well enough could have told the woman-trafficker.

"Bring Hen-tze here," he ordered Ho-fang, and lit a cigarette. His hand was wonderfully steady, he thought, considering what was blazing inside him.

Peroda, a slightly mystified look upon his oily face, looked perturbed.

"What she got to do wit' eet—these yellow woman?" he demanded.

"Quite a lot," answered Winsford, and stood up. "If I took this dam'd offer you came here to-day with to the officials at Hanoi, they'd believe it fast enough, but they

couldn't jump for you, because there'd be no proof. They'd be as helpless to get at you in law, as I'd be when you'd double-crossed me for what you agreed to pay—if I were dam' fool enough to take your job on. However, I have got something here I *can* take them; flesh and blood there's no getting away from. You'd double-cross me, would you, you bloody greasy snake! You'd threaten me: *me*, Richard Winsford! By God!"

As the girl Hen-tze stepped on to the verandah, the sallow face of the woman-trader changed to a strange, uncanny grey. His fish eyes fastened upon the trembling woman with almost hypnotic intensity. Before him she quailed visibly; trembling from head to foot.

"You stole this woman," went on Winsford, his eyes blazing now with the intensity of his suppressed rage. "Kidnapped her from her husband down at Hue. You passed her on to me with a faked receipt of legal purchase. Right. Well, she's going back to Hue to-night, but I'm taking her into Hanoi *first*. She can tell her story to the French police, and whatever she tells them, I'll back her up in. This other, this *prize* you've brought, I'll keep her, and not one red cent do you get. You can go, Hen-tze; and you can tell the other she stops—I've taken her in exchange."

The girl hurried away out of sight of those terrible eyes that now were glaring at her in bestial ferocity.

Winsford dug two rigid fingers into the reedy chest of the Portuguese.

"Now get out of Annam, Peroda," he advised grimly, "and quick too! They've wanted you for a long time, and now they'll *get* you. And you give me one word, you or that slink-thief with you, and I'll pound you so that you

won't have got more than ten yards on the road when they come after you. Now, *get out!*"

He picked up the other man's hat and tossed it out into the blazing sunlight.

"Follow it, you scum," he ordered. "Before I lose control of myself and man-handle you, properly."

He turned his back upon the other in open contempt—and then came Peroda's answer. Like a flash his hand went back for a knife in his belt. There came a sharp cry of warning from Ho-fang; then, like a monkey he sprang upon Peroda's chest and, clinging to him, fought at his face with the viciousness of a tiger. Winsford swung, in his hand a heavy automatic pistol. He lifted it to cover the Portuguese, but something he saw made him take his finger from the trigger. Ho-fang could settle this business without aid from him.

His reedy legs twined immovably around the man's slight body and one hand gripped in his thick curly hair behind, with the long, claw-like nails of the other, Ho-fang was literally tearing the sallow face to pieces. Nor did he confine his attentions to that hand alone—no fighting-dog could have used his teeth with more dire and terrible results than was this implacable little fighting-fiend from the wharves of Hanoi. Winsford stared at the havoc he was making of his enemy's face—thunder-struck.

One shrill scream came from Peroda as those dreadful nails clawed in under the lid of one eye. In an agony he danced about, striving desperately to rid himself of this hellish human-wild-cat who unquestionably meant blinding him. A trembling hand began again fumbling in his belt—then an icy, cold voice warned him.

"You pull that knife of yours, Peroda," Winsford told him, "and I'll put a bullet clean through you."

Mateo, wicked-eyed, tried to get close to the two mixed-up figures—he had something in mind to release his uncle of this clinging terror. Winsford stepped forward and crashed his hairy fist under his chin—he went down like a log and stayed there.

With another and a still more terrible scream Peroda, with his clawing, biting incubus still upon his chest, leaped from the verandah and staggered blindly for the waiting *sampan*.

"Let him go," Winsford ordered, and, obediently enough, Ho-fang released his grip and dropped to the ground.

Instantly Peroda, relieved of his burden, blood streaming from his eyes and, indeed, every inch of his face, darted for the jetty. Once there, his hand again flashed back.

The voice of Richard Winsford rang out.

"You try that knife-throwing trick of yours, Peroda," he warned, "and I'll shoot you like a dog. For two pins, I'd do it, anyway."

His automatic barked and a shot whistled scarcely a foot over Peroda's head. Instantly that gentleman dived into the *sampan*; there was little doubt that he meant abandoning his graceless nephew to the tender mercies of his enemies.

"Hold that *sampan*," Winsford ordered; and picking up the now groaning youth as though he had been a feather, carried him down to the jetty and hurled his limp form on the top of his relative, knocking him flat.

"Get on," he ordered menacing the *sampan*-man with

his pistol. "And the next day you show up on the Song-ka river, Peroda, will be your last."

The boat flew toward the centre of the wide river as though propelled by a hundred unseen hands. Slowly Winsford turned back towards the verandah; pausing once to take out his partner's telegran and re-read it carefully. When he returned to his chair, his small henchman was squatted in his corner, swinging the *punkah* as calmly as though no such person as the Señor Leon Peroda of Annam had ever existed. Not one solitary mark did his grimy countenance show of his recent combat.

For some time his lord and master regarded him with a slightly puzzled air.

"I've seen some fiends out of hell fight before to-day," he observed presently, "but damme if ever I've struck anything like *you*. I should say, Ho, that after the sample he's had, Peroda would sooner have ten minutes with the devil than another five with you."

Ho-fang received the compliment with a beam of the very highest delight.

"Nlex' ttime," he said, "I do plenny mluch more."

Winsford shook his head.

"There won't be any next time, Ho-fang—if Peroda sees you first. Unless," he amended thoughtfully, "he comes up behind you." He took a silver dollar from his pocket and tossed it across. "You'd better buy that knife you were talking about, and"—he fished out a second dollar and sent it after the first—"get a *good* one while you're at it. If the police don't hunt him out of Annam, I've an idea you'll want it one day."

Ho-fang, his face wreathed in the most hideous smile he had until then ever achieved, breathed upon his two silver dollars and polished them vigorously.

"Nlex' tlime," he assured his benefactor benignly, "Hofang all-slame clut his goddam heart out."

But Richard Winsford had already got that telegram out again and was lost in it.

CHAPTER VI

YUN-NAN

THREE days the two traders had been in the strange, walled old city that, since its foundation in the Chow dynasty, one thousand one hundred years before Christ, had never altered in one single characteristic.

Old China this, which moved on placidly, heedless of treaties with the Foreign Devils, of concessions and ports in which they gathered. Narrow streets where a man could stand and touch both walls, filled with the tiny shops of the porcelain-makers, the cobblers, the rug-makers, the fish-driers and all who went to make up its teeming human-hive.

Along the bank of river fringing the ancient city—the broad, fast-running Son-ka, or Red River, there was still another population. The boat-dwellers who had been born upon, reared in, and never known other shelter than that of their frail craft. Miles of them touching, side to side; housing a population well-nigh as great as that of the city within.

Nor were these mountain-bred Yun-nanese—as Chan-fu had said of his men in the house at Oxford—as tolerant of Occidentals as was he. The glances that followed the two white men, slant and inscrutable, were yet piercing with dark and bloody hatred of all men of white skin—Foreign Devils. But no other sign was shown—were not

these under the protection of the Illustrious Mandarin, Chan-fu; living indeed under the very roof of his still more illustrious father, the lord of life and death, the Mandarin-*Tao-toi*, Chan-fu. May the bones of their ancestors be desecrated and scattered—but they were safe. None molested them; indeed, upon the orders of the aged *Tao-toi*, great merchants sought them out to trade with them.

But always were they preceded through the narrow streets by one sinister figure—a mighty mute of over seven feet high, who bore in his hand the symbol of the *Tao-toi's* power: a great, broad-bladed, razor-edged sword. Hwang, the son of Hwang, the son of Hwang, in line as far back as Chan-fu's own; whose Hereditary Executioners and Torturers they were. No man of low degree dared raise his eyes to the pitiless ones of the mute; almond-eyed children fled precipitately around corners at his approach.

There were times when, borne shoulder high in palanquins, the younger Chan-fu accompanied them; where he went no man, woman, or child remained upright, but bowed their shaven heads to the very cobbles until he had passed.

The child Madeline had not been brought up the river with them, but left in the charge of a Chinese *aymah* Legarde had engaged for her in Singapore. And also, though he was quite unaware of it, one other.

Upon the morning of their departure in the yacht-like launch which had come down the river to meet Chan-fu at Hanoi, Winsford, a troubled look upon his face, had called his henchman Ho-fang to the edge of the jetty—well out of earshot of all belonging to the bungalow.

"Ho-fang," he bade him, "you watch the little Missie night and day. I'm troubled about Peroda. I heard at Hanoi last night that he has not been taken—he is out in the hills somewhere. Mr. Legarde knows nothing of the trouble with him. I daren't tell him, or he might have backed out of this up-river run." He stood silent a moment, his hard-rugged face lined with thought. "It means so much, this trip," he went on slowly to himself. "The only hope I can ever see of realizing that dream of mine. But I'm anxious because, knowing we're away—and he'll soon find that out—he may try something. Women," he hissed through his teeth, "are his dam'd trade, and if he could get hands upon this kid of Legarde's . . . By God, but what a revenge! But it—it won't bear thinking of."

"Hlim clome near here," spat Ho-fang, a vertible imp of evil at this moment, "I killum. *Hoki!*" He drew from his belt his most cherished possession: the keen, curved-bladed, double-edged bowie-knife he had bought with the two dollars Winsford had given him. "All-slame mluch plenty sharp." He gave a demonstration of the notorious Chinese disembowelling stroke— "He clome I fix him. All li!"

"It's night I'm scared of. He won't venture this way by day. You sleep day time; night, keep on the prow near the little Missie's door. Understand?"

"All-li."

"And don't forget he's a knife-thrower, Ho. Don't think you're safe because he's fifty feet or so from you. If once he gets a square aim at you, you're done for."

"All-li. Pletty mluch Ho-fang tlow knife. Me learn. You slee." He marked out a spot on the side of the go-down by elegantly and accurately spitting at it, then re-

turned to Winsford's side and, with lightning action, drew his knife and hurled it. It struck quivering in the exact centre of the moist spot.

Winsford in genuine surprise clapped his hand down upon Ho-fang's narrow shoulder.

"By gad, boy," he exclaimed, "but you're a marvel. I couldn't master that trick in a thousand years. All right. I leave little Missie with you."

Ho-fang grinned from ear to ear.

"All-li," he returned. "You leave lit' Mlissie with Ho-fang. All-li."

And the last the two traders had seen of their household was the little dark-haired girl waving to them from the end of the bamboo wharf. Nearby, the immobile figure of Ho-fang squatted. He was industriously sharpening a glittering-bladed knife upon a stone.

"That tatterdemalion protégé of yours doesn't seem to improve with time, Richard," Legarde remarked amusedly. "Still remains the same small savage as the day you bought him. No alteration for the better."

Winsford studied the squatting figure frowningly.

"One of these days we may be dam'd glad that there isn't," he answered gruffly and enigmatically; then moved away.

But as the launch threaded her way in and out among the craft thick before the river-port of Son-tai, Winsford tossed a heavily-wrapped packet across to the captain of a junk going down-stream. His request was that it be delivered to his house-boy, Ho-fang, as they passed. It contained his automatic-pistol and all the bullet-clips he carried.

"I've an idea, little yellow man," he muttered, "that you'll want it before we get back."

Later, when at Yuen-kiang, the great range of mountains closed in upon the river, Legarde remarked upon the impenetrability of the country they passed through.

"A man," he said, looking up at the towering cliffs of the gorge, from two to three thousand feet in height, through which the river flowed, "would have a devil of a time to get out of this country if the yellow men didn't want him to. There's no way out to the coast but the river and"—he shrugged his shoulders—"what would be his chance this way, Richard?"

Winsford glanced at him quickly.

"To get down this Son-ka—none," was his instant reply. "But there *is* a way out," he went on, almost as if speaking to himself, "and it's been done."

"Who by?"

Winsford laughed; a dry, hard cachination.

"A man I knew once," he answered evasively.

Legarde, out of the corner of his eye, gave him a look. There were times when he was forced to wonder just how much of interior China his rough-handed partner *did* know; and where he had been to acquire the knowledge he unquestionably had of strange, remote places. Places, like this city they were upon their way to, where the life of a white man, unless under powerful protection, was not worth a moment's purchase. There were also times when he found himself speculating considerably as to just what the business might have been that took him there. But of that, in drink or out of it, no word could ever be dragged from Winsford's lips. Upon some phases of his peripatetic life, the grave was not more silent than this hard-bitten Englishman.

"A man," Legarde put tentatively, "would need the resource and cunning of the very devil."

"The devil looks after his own," was the only reply he got.

It was upon the third morning after their arrival—and after, incidentally, a long interview with the aged *Tao-toi's* men of business affairs, which the two traders had left with lighted eyes—that they met the young Mandarin Chan-fu in the wonderful gardens of his father's palace. Nearby, and attached to it by a long corridor, towered the great, double pagodas of the Temple.

"Come," he said pleasantly, "and I will show you something never before seen by the eyes of a white man, and in all probability never may be again." He led the way to the One Hundred White Steps by which the great edifice of worship was entered.

"I show you these things," he proceeded, "that you may judge just *how* much we are heathens—in the polite term your Occidental missionaries have for us—and also how much those black-coated apostles of your creeds of yesterday are ever like to change us from our ancient beliefs. They mean well, no doubt; but—what is that most apt expression of yours? Ah! 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions.' An excellent saying—worthy of our great Confucius."

He led the way in upon a sight which made both white men stand and gasp. Of the vastness of the huge temple, the exterior gave no true indication whatever. It was immense—thousands of worshippers could have entered together. And all about its walls, huge, terrible-faced Josses, squatted upon their marble plinths, before them burning incense-sticks which filled the building with a subtle, aromatic aroma.

But it was not the size or vivid colouring of these monstrous idols which kept the two men in semi-stunned

silence as they moved from one to another. It was the jewels with which each blazed; set into them, hung upon them in such lavish prodigality that they might have been the rag dolls of a country-child hung about with daisy chains. Upon each one of them was a vast fortune; what the aggregate value of the whole might be, no man could make even the roughest computation.

Before one smaller but incredibly richly-hung altar, railed away by what seemed to be beaten silver work of astonishing beauty, Chan-fu prostrated himself humbly.

"The Joss of the Chan-fu," he later explained quietly. "It has stood in this temple since the *Hia* dynasty, to which the first traceable one of my glorious ancestors belonged—two thousand years before the birth of your prophet, Jesus Christ. Erected here long before this city of Yun-nan was built—when this was all just a mountain fastness held by my forefathers. It was the Joss of my ancestors, is now my father's, and will one day be mine. It is the most sacred thing upon this earth in our eyes—before even the graves of our forefathers; for he was the divinity of them all. Each one as he has come into their hands has loaded him with gifts of propitiation—as you may see."

"Good God," gasped Legarde, stricken with amazement, "in the name of Heaven, what are those jewels worth?"

Chan-fu smiled.

"Would you have us attempt to estimate in money our gifts to an all-powerful god?" he asked quietly.

"No, no, but . . . those rubies are . . . I never dreamed of anything like that star."

He pointed to a pendent star of huge rubies that, suspended from a chain of diamonds, hung upon the breast of the hideous Joss. The stones of which it was composed

were enormous—beyond belief. One speaks thoughtlessly of stones of the size of a pigeon's egg; these literally were so, and of the most perfect matching and colour.

"They are old Burmese and of the true pigeon-blood colour," Chan-fu said, in answer to a question from Legarde. "The world-famous Red Star of Yun-nan. Brought into this province across the Tanen Tung Gyi mountains a thousand years before the Great Wall was built, when Hindustan to the China Sea was all the Celestial Empire. It is perhaps our most cherished possession—but only where it hangs. As mere jewels, the rubies of the Star are, of course, priceless." He turned to Winsford, who since entering the great temple had not uttered one syllable. "You are very silent," he said.

"There is enough here, Excellency," Winsford said soberly, "to keep a man silent. As a matter of fact, I was wondering about something."

"And what, if one may ask?"

"Certainly. I was wondering how under the sun you protect these jewels from robbery, for there must be a good many men, even in Yun-nan, to chance a life to lay hands on them."

The Chinaman slowly shook his head.

"Although, as I understand, you have been a good many years in China, you do not begin to understand us, Mr. Winsford. There is no one here to guard them—unless you would call the aged priests of the temple, guards; so feeble most of them, that a blow would kill them. Night and day the temple stands open—just as you see it now. Anyone may enter, from the poorest coolie to—to my illustrious father himself. Indeed"—he pointed to a small door behind the Joss—"many times his servants have found him at worship here alone, and in the dead of

night. But if you took every jewel that is here and flung them in a heap at the door, there is no man, even the most depraved and vicious criminal who one day will die under torture, who would look upon them with anything other than awe. Men may rob their fellow men, Mr. Winsford, but Chinamen do not rob their gods. And even were there one sunk so low as to even consider it, one other thing would stop him."

"And that?"

"The vengeance of the god he has defiled," uttered Chan-fu solemnly. "Not in life would he escape it. *And* after that—who knows?"

Silently they turned and slowly left the Temple.

The Cries of the Hour had called the first cock-crow from the city walls when Legarde started from sleep at the touch of a hand. Bending over him was his partner.

"S-sh!" Winsford cautioned, "speak in a whisper."

"What is it?"

"Something that's going to put us on easy street for the rest of our lives—if you're game to take a chance," was the tense reply. "Now listen to me. Don't chip in until I've finished." He went to the door of the room, opened it perhaps an inch and stood listening. Satisfied, he came back to the side of the bed and sat again.

"You saw that stuff to-day," he went on jerkily, evidently struggling with a feverish excitement. "There's a fortune there in just what two men can carry away in their pockets."

Legarde started, but the other checked him.

"Hold on—let me finish. You said to-day there wasn't a way out down to the coast except by the Son-ka river—that a man could never get through if they wanted to

hold him. I told you I knew one man who had. That was right. I was the man. There *is* another way out and down to Hanoi and I've done the trip. *And—*" his voice hardened—"with an army of yellow men out for me. What I've done once, I can do again—if you're game enough."

"What in God's name is in your mind?"

"That Red Star for one thing. It's been there ever since I saw it. And other things. There's a fortune there waiting for two resolute men to pick up."

"Temple looting!" Legarde whispered in horror.

"Bah! You're not going to pretend to me that you've any respect for their dam'd senseless idols—that you're afraid of their cursed gods!"

"I'm afraid of their owners," the other whispered back. "My God, man—if they took us!"

"They won't! I played the game before—and got away with the stuff. A swine robbed me out of it, but that's neither here nor there. I squared up with him later."

"You've looted temples here?"

"One—nearly as bad a place as this to tackle—Li-Keang, just to the north of here."

The other stared towards him incredulously in the dark.

"And you dared to come back up the Son-ka again?"

"Dared! There's dam'd little I won't dare for quick money, Legarde—enough to keep me right through. I'm sick of this struggling on, putting a few hundreds away here, losing it again there. Never making a strike that means anything, except just to carry on the game a bit further. I'm sick of this country—sick of the sun, of jabbering yellow-men. I've got—what's the word, *nostalgia*, is it?—I want England; to see a bit of green country again, to live a white man's life in a white man's city, London. And there's only one way to do it. This trade

young Chan-fu's put in our way is good enough of its kind—but it won't do that. We'll have a bit more money, better credit—yes. And there it ends. But let us pull the other thing off, take one desperate chance for a big shot, and we'll live in the lap of luxury all our lives. Rich men—really rich. Think of the kid, and what you can do for her," he whispered insidiously. "You're not going to condemn her to a lifetime in a hole like Hanoi, are you? Our pockets full—that's all; nothing to hamper us, nothing to impede. And I know a way out they'll never dream of. To get out of this country down to the coast, you've got to go *further in*—that's the secret. They're looking for us *down* the river, and we're making further inland for Tali."

"Why—why Tali?" stammered the other.

"Because at Tali we join up with the other river—the *Nam-Tai*, the Black River. They'll be searching for us along the Red, and we'll be coming down on the Black—fifty miles away. Red and Black!" he whispered excitedly, "it's like *Rouge et Noir*—and *Noir* wins! Now listen to me . . ."

The third cock-crow had been called when Winsford crept back to his own room leaving behind him a man who had been persuaded into a thing against his will. A man, moreover, whose heart had gone as cold as a lump of ice with the mere thought of what was before them.

And it was to be done quickly, Winsford had said—the night following. Legarde was to leave everything to him. Out of the muck-heap of a city he would find coolies' clothes—things for disguises. He got up and, lighting a cigarette, paced his room, If it worked . . . and Winsford could get them down safely by the Black River . . . fortune! *Fortune!* Not just a competence, but *riches!* But

if they failed . . . if . . . There came vividly to his memory a string of poor devils who had passed them chained together neck to neck on their way to the torture. He shuddered right through him. Death was one thing . . . but *that!*

The very thought turned him sick at the stomach.

But Winsford had sworn he would do the job alone if he would not come in! Work it, and get out as he had done before—and leave him behind. Alone, in their hands. *Alone!* Would they believe him when he swore that he knew nothing of it? Someone would have to pay for the desecration of their gods. Would it be him . . . alone out in that horrible square where he had seen the heads of unfortunate wretches sliced off—and roll about like so many pumpkins? Perhaps they would torture him there that all men might see the vengeance of the Chan-fu upon a Foreign Devil who defiled yellow gods!

A cold sweat broke out on his forehead and lips.

No—not alone. If Winsford made the attempt, then both must be in it. Winsford was a desperate man, and a cunning one. He had done it before—and succeeded. But he could not be left alone when the other had fled. Not alone—anything but that!

At the call of the second cock-crow next night, a tocsin rang suddenly out from the Temple. Yellow gods had been defiled by the impious hands of Foreign Devils! And *worse*. There, before the rifled Joss of his forefathers, lay a feeble old figure dead—strangled as he knelt in prayer; he who had an hour ago been the omnipotent Mandarin—*Tao-toi*, Chan-fu.

And over the stark body stood, with cold, stony eyes, his son. With uplifted hand he swore an oath so terrible

that men listening breathlessly shuddered as he spoke. Nor did that oath to the dead end with those who had done this dreadful deed. To them and all that was theirs, to those who followed them, man, woman, or child to the last farthing of their possessions, through life and into death, down into the very jaws of hell the vengeance of Chan-fu would follow them.

Then, at a command, the city became one vast vengeful horde; torches blowed along the river bank; men with mad eyes blazing with blood-lust poured forth upon all roads towards the city of Hanoi.

And meantime two men whose hearts thumped at their chests, plodded desperately on to get back into the mountains that overhang Tali. One of them was sobbing with terror as he ran.

Eighteen days later—eighteen days and nights of hell, of hunger and thirst, of hiding by day and creeping along in footsore agony by night—two gaunt, haggard, human scarecrows staggered into the clearing of what had once been a bungalow and go-down. Nothing met their eyes but a heap of charred ruins. Of living humanity not one trace was there to be seen.

"My Christ! the child!" screamed the weaker of the two through thirst-blackened lips.

It was the last sound he ever uttered. From a giant *toelang* tree there came one shot. With a little choking cough he crumpled in a heap, a bullet squarely through his heart.

Instantly the other ducked to cover. A second shot rang out from somewhere nearby. From the tree a blue-clad coolie with a great white hieroglyphic upon his chest came down with a sickening thud. Winsford's bloodshot

eyes moved cautiously around. Squatted in an angle where a few charred planks made some cover, his head pitiaibly blood-stained, upon his emaciated, half-naked body a hundred knife slashes, was the boy, Ho-fang. Along the ground and scarce making a rustle in the act, Winsford dragged himself towards him. The yellow boy grinned feebly, piteously, at him.

"Where's—where's the kid—the little Missie?" Winsford demanded hoarsely.

"Chan-fu him got her," came from the squatting figure. "Ho-fang fight plenny mluch. No good. Tloo many—they lemme dlead. When I wlake—all gone. On'y few lef' wlatch for you. Ho-fang do plenny best, but no can do slave lil' Mlissie, Boss. Leg all slame bloke. You killum Ho-fang, I not slave lil' Mlissie? All-li."

He sat immobile, a small, stoic fatalist, waiting for death—the reward of him who had failed in his trust. In the thin, yellow, wiry hand was still clutched the automatic pistol, the knife which had gleamed in the sun as they had departed up-river, lay by his side, dulled by blackness with dark, viscid stains; but around and about lay stiff, prone forms in the blue silk of the Chan-fu. Ho-fang had indeed fought his fight.

Tears came suddenly into the eyes of the man looking down upon him, then he turned abruptly away to the dead body of his partner.

"If I could have seen this, Jules," he murmured, "Before God I'd have died in the gutter before I'd have led you into it!"

Openly, quite without fear, he walked to the body of one of the dead Chinamen, took from it a cartridge belt, and picked up the modern automatic rifle which lay by his side.

Then strode back to where Ho-fang, with dulling eyes, lay watching.

"Bloss, all blame I hide bloat under jetty. You glet much plenny qlick to Hanoi. Ho-fang hide by river—kleep 'em back."

"Don't talk like a dam'd fool," Winsford answered him roughly; then, stooping with an effort, picked the tattered figure from the ground and staggered towards the jetty with him.

"There's one place in this world where Chan-fu's fellow's claws will never reach us, Ho, and that's London. The quicker we're out of this cursed country, the better."

Two nights later a boat of the French *Messageries Maritime* was bearing them away from the flat, sun-baked coast where a man had lived half his desperate life in poverty—to leave it at last with unhallowed wealth.

The boat had not passed Pirate Island when from the old city of Yun-nan a cable was despatched to England. It was sent to a man called Joseph Benson, at the address of a certain bank in Oxford.

END OF BOOK I

BOOK THE SECOND
INHERITANCE

CHAPTER VII

TEN YEARS LATER

IT was unquestionably a strange house, this lonely-looking old Elizabethan place upon Barnes Common, in which the wealthy old *nabob* from China—or perhaps it was India?—resided. A strange house, habited—so it was whispered in the neighbourhood—by strange people.

A house that no one ever seemed to come to, or no one ever seemed to go out of—that curious eyes had ever been able to discover. A few tradesmen, certainly; but they never got further inside the premises than a certain gate in the large high-walled garden, where a bull-headed, and anything but pleasant-looking man-servant named Benson attended to them and, business concluded, unceremoniously locked them out again. Little use to apply to *them* for any salacious information—the kind most eagerly sought for—of this hermit-like man, Richard Winsford, or his two retainers, white and yellow.

For that there was a real, pig-tailed Chinaman living in that house was certain: first having been reported by small boys who had climbed the wall in search of apples, and who had suddenly found themselves confronted with this startling apparition. He was, they said, far more horrible than any orang-outang to look at, and twenty times more active.

For some years the house had stood empty, gradually growing in exterior desolation and decay, until locally it became known as "The Silent House." Nor with the coming of the grey-haired, hard-featured man who had bought it, did it in any way alter. By day, silent as the grave; by night, no lights showed from its heavily-barred windows. It still remained: The Silent House.

But at the beginning, the social life of Barnes Common had regarded things more hopefully. Great alterations were understood to be in progress in the old place. Carpenters, masons, decorators and others of a like ilk were reported as busy at work there; portentous signs of revival from its decay—until it began to be noticed that no local man was engaged in the work. Those so employed came from other parts of the country, stayed in the house whilst they did their jobs, then returned as silently as they came.

Some indeed, it was asserted, were even *locked in* at their work: that no living soul but the man who paid them could see what it was they were at. Gradually the rumour went round that this Winsford of "The Silent House" was a miser—busy constructing secret hiding-places for his well-nigh inconceivable wealth; places, it began to be cordially hoped, that the grim curmudgeon would never be able to remember himself.

That was ten years ago, and in those long years no soul in the place had learned to know him any better than they did the day he came. Very, *very* rare it was for him to leave the precincts of his own house and garden; and when he did, it was noticed that he seemed to be always on the alert for something; eyeing with unconcealed suspicion each person who approached him, often darting around in

his tracks, as though to take the measure of those coming up behind him.

One other thing, among many, to cause brisk comment was the news, filtering out in some way, that in his house Winsford kept a snake. Other reports were that it was the pet of the Chinaman, who played strange music to it on an instrument which, in his hands, gave forth weird and horrible sounds.

One man there was, whose business lay in something legal in or around the neighbourhood of Lincoln's Inn Fields, who swore that he had once seen Winsford go into the offices of those pillars of the legal fraternity: Messrs. Herrington and Roe, *the* Solicitors. Being slightly curious, he waited to see him come out again, but as he was closeted with those legal eminents some two solid hours, that pleasure was denied him. Which, as he argued, meant that this Winsford must be an enormously wealthy man. Anybody who was permitted to stop in the offices of Herrington and Roe for two hours had *Money*—without it they would not have been encouraged to stay two seconds.

And that, people recollected suddenly, was little over a month before his sudden, and entirely inexplicable death. Inexplicable, until a calm, prosaic coroner's inquest bought it in: Death by Accident—nothing more mysterious or exciting than that the great, heavy coping-stone over his own morning-room window had become loosened by time and fallen upon him, fatally.

No more: no less. The unfortunate man who, years before, had spent so much time and money secretly dabbling in masonry, had overlooked the one most vital bit in the building. As if in some kind of inanimate revenge

for neglect, it fell upon him and killed him. And now he was safely interred, and someone else owned both his millions and the mysterious Silent House.

It was a fine, beamed and oak-panelled morning-room in which Richard Winsford had spent by far the greater number of his hours, particularly in the last few years of his existence. Deep-set and square, with French windows on to the garden, and a staircase leading from it away into the recesses of the rambling old house.

It was a room of which he was particularly, and justly, fond; so fond indeed that he never left it for long, and his own bed-room opened off it—almost as if the deceased gentlemen wanted it to be always under his watchful eye, day or night.

Its principal and dominant feature was a huge, recessed fireplace, unquestionably of the Elizabethan period, with deep and thick mantel, to which were enormously thick and heavy square balustrades, embellished by magnificent carving. It was a noble adjunct to any room, and had always seemed to be an especial object of admiration to its late owner. Even his bed was so placed that upon opening his eyes it was the first thing they fell upon, and the door of his bedroom was never closed at night—whatever else in that house was sedulously locked, bolted and barred. Additionally, a low light was always kept burning in the room; being so arranged that its rays fell directly upon the beauties of this substantial specimen of the wood-carver's art.

Upon this particular late summer morning—September the twenty-third, to be exact, some two days after the owner of the house had been laid away to the first real rest his chequered existence had ever known—a strange

happening took place in that room. Not only in that room, but around and about that very mantelpiece. Something so strange that—had such a thing been possible—it would have brought the hard-bitten Winsford out of his grave, at the jump, gun in hand.

Upon his knees, in front of it and working swiftly and silently at a large bowl of Chinese brass which stood upon a low Moorish stool in the centre of the fireplace, he would have seen none other than Mateo, that youthful child of all evil whom, just ten years ago, he had felled flat upon his verandah, and later tossed into a *sampan* on the top of that arch-priest of villainy, his uncle, the Señor Leon Peroda.

Dexterous and knowledgeable twists of his hands he was giving at this quite innocent-looking ornament, when suddenly a cunningly concealed trap in the bottom of the bowl opened and, with a low cry of excitement, he drew from it a small case. From this again he extracted a package of what were obviously Bonds-to-Bearer. The exultant sound which broke from his lips testified to the amount of their value. It was the last young Señor Mateo ever uttered—in this world at least.

From nowhere, from out of the ground for all the attacked man could tell, Ho-fang was upon him; bony, sinewy hands gripping at his throat in a clutch that held him helpless. Not the fierce, wild-cat fight of the coolie-boy Mateo had seen scarify his uncle, but the silent, inexorable, implacable attack of a killer. Madly Mateo worked to get at his knife. At last he succeeded—to be suddenly twisted around into a position of agonizing helplessness. No word, no sound, came from either. Steadily

the Chinaman forced the intruder back against the upper side of the mantel, and then, for the first time, Mateo realized from where the dreaded Ho-fang had sprung upon him. In the upper balustrade of that heavily-built fireplace was a panel door, open; and the Chinaman was forcing him towards it, slowly and surely.

One last, desperate effort he made to free himself of that deadly clutch upon his throat, then suddenly, with a choking convulsion, his head dropped upon his chest. The figure of the Portuguese sprawled very limply against the slight Chinaman. One glance Ho-fang gave at him, then uttered the soft "*Hoki!*" of perfect satisfaction. A moment later the body of the dead man, still gripping that parcel, the pursuit of which had cost him his life, disappeared through that mysterious panel-door. Instantly it closed upon him, and the mystery of his coming and going.

As becomes a person to whom life or death is but a happening of the day, Ho-fang bent, calmly arranged the rugs which had been disarranged in the soundless struggle, re-settled the brass bowl to a nicety, then quietly crossed the room. At a curtained opening which apparently led to the domestic quarters of the two unusual servants the late master had maintained, he halted and passed a final calm, but keen scrutiny about the room. No sign existed that it had ever been entered that morning, much less that it had been a few moments since the scene of a deadly combat.

That old gargoyle-like smile appeared a moment upon Ho-fang's features.

"All-li," he observed cheerfully, and vanished.

At which exact moment the French windows opened and through them, with the utmost casualness, strolled a young man. Whoever he might prove to be, it could safely

have been said that even Solomon upon his most dashing day was not arrayed as was his personage. And, incidentally, he looked as though either toiling or spinning would be equally obnoxious in his sight.

CHAPTER VIII

NEXT OF KIN

WHEN Captain Philip Barty, late of His Majesty's Royal Air Force, retired from that body by force of innumerable accidents, it lost one of its brightest flowers. When he faded from their debonair company, they lost a comrade irreproachable as to his tailoring—and utterly and entirely irrepressible as to anything else. A gay and volatile person, who existed royally upon the most meagre of incomes, who knew everybody and anybody—and owed most of them something more than a trifle; but managed in some way to keep the pot boiling whilst he, Micawber-like, waited for something to turn up.

Unlike his late brother-officer, and particular chum, Captain George Winsford, he was entirely without that solidity of outlook generally considered necessary in a serious member of society. If any person or persons could find anything serious in the make up of Captain Philip Barty, that gossamer-minded person would unquestionably have presented them with something handsome—to commemorate the Great Discovery.

This then was the young gentleman who, invading the morning-room of the late Richard Winsford, banged spiritedly, and noisily, upon the table with his cane and vociferated "Shop!" at the top of his voice.

This form of telegraphy not being instantly productive of results, he repeated it with even greater force, upon which the thick, broken features of the butler, Benson, appeared through the curtains and, staring at him in amazement, came slowly forward.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" he said.

Captain Barty eyed him severely.

"Ah, there you are—thought you were all dead here."

Apology in his tone, Benson explained:

"Sorry if you've been waiting, sir, but I didn't expect you just yet. Mr. Herrington said three o'clock, sir."

"Who?"

"Mr. Herrington; the solicitor, sir."

Captain Barty waved an airy hand.

"Never heard of him."

A puzzled frown upon his heavy forehead, Benson again repeated himself.

"Mr. *Herrington*. Your uncle's solicitor, sir."

To which the Captain responded amazingly: "Haven't got an uncle. *I'm* not Captain Winsford."

Instantly the big servitor stiffened: his voice and attitude became frigidity itself.

"Then might I ask how you got in here?"

"You might; certainly. Through the window," he was informed genially.

The frown upon Benson's face deepened.

"Perhaps you're a friend of Captain Winsford's, sir?" he put tentatively. "He wrote to say that a Captain Barty might call."

"Captain Barty," he was further informed, "*has* called I'm him."

Benson's strained attitude relaxed visibly. He became almost affable.

"Sorry, sir. Will you make yourself at home until Captain Winsford comes?"

Captain Barty immediately took possession of the best chair he could see.

"Sound idea," he agreed. "We'll wait until he comes, eh? You—er—you buttle here?"

"I *was* the late Mr. Winsford's butler, sir. My name is Benson; Joseph Benson."

"The *late* . . . ?"

"Yes, sir."

Captain Barty screwed his monocle further into his eye, regarded the speaker critically.

"Upon my soul, Benson, you look a lot more like a scrapper than a butler. No offence, old chappie—but you do, really."

Benson involuntarily inflated his huge torso.

"I . . ." he began, then checked himself suddenly, "I—er—used to do a little bit at it, sir. A *very* little."

Captain Barty's face lit with an expression of pure and unadulterated joy.

"*No!*" he exclaimed. "By gad, Benson, that's rippin'. You wait until Captain Winsford arrives and hears that. I'm a fairly warm member myself, but Winnie's simply *mustard*. He'll take the greatest delight in flopping you out every morning before breakfast."

"Very kind of him, I'm sure, sir," Benson responded dryly, a curious inflection in his voice.

The front door bell rang suddenly. Captain Barty bounded from his chair: "That's the old fellow now. Look slippery, Benson."

Benson went quickly through the hall and opened the front door,

"This way, Winnie me lad," bawled the irrepressible Barty. "Your uncle Barty's here in response to the call!"

It was a tall, well-built young fellow who greeted the Captain warmly: a good-looking, frank-eyed chap with the lean, hard look and trim figure of an athlete.

"Hullo, Barty—here already! Good sport!"

"Always on the spot, old thing," modestly declaimed the Captain. "Now, what's the bother?"

"Tell you in a moment, old son."

He turned to Benson who, from the hall door, had been watching him closely; from the slightly-narrowed, thoughtful eyes, one might have thought, critically.

"By the way, I'm George Winsford," he announced pleasantly. "And you, I take it, were my late uncle's butler?"

"Yes, sir. Benson is my name, sir."

"Right ho—I'll remember that. Look after my traps there, will you?"

"Very good, sir." With a deferential bow Benson turned back into the hall.

"Traps?" enquired his friend in some surprise. "Are we staying here then?"

Winsford laughed.

"Don't know yet, but I came prepared." From his pocket he took a letter. "Had this from some solicitors telling me that my uncle Richard Winsford was dead and had left me some property and all that. Asked me to report myself here at three *pip emma* and hear the details. So I thought I'd better have you with me."

Captain Barty palpably raked his memory.

"Never heard you speak of the dear departed."

"Never set eyes on him in my life," Winsford told

him. "Had some faint idea he existed and all that. Also that he'd been a tough nut out in the East. But that's all."

Captain Barty touched upon a delicate point.

"Solicitor chaps say how much we'll get out of it?" he asked.

Winsford laughed: "We?" he countered.

Captain Barty raised a deprecating hand.

"Now—no sarcasm—dear old thing. I'm in this, surely?"

Winsford smiled. "Chief toucher, perhaps."

"As long as I'm in, I don't mind. How much do you think?"

"Oh, I don't know. Ten thousand, perhaps."

Captain Philip Barty drew a long whistling breath.

"It couldn't have come at a better moment," he said solemnly. "I'm right up to my neck in the loop the loop!"

Benson, crossing back into the hall, was hailed by Winsford.

"Comfortable dug-out this by the look of it, Benson—what?"

The butler bowed gravely.

"Your late uncle spared no expense to make it comfortable, sir. He told me more than once that he had paid fifty thousand pounds for the house and grounds, sir."

"Fifty! . . . we're in luck's way, Winnie," whispered Captain Barty exultingly.

"How long did my uncle live here?"

"Altogether, about ten years, sir. I had been with him exactly eight on the day of the accident."

Winsford looked at him puzzledly.

"Accident," he asked. "What accident?"

"A coping-stone fell upon the old gentleman, sir." He

pointed to the French-window leading into the garden. "From over that window, sir."

"For the future," announced Captain Barty with great finality, "I use the front door!"

"What's the place called, Benson?" Winsford asked curiously.

"It's never had a proper name, sir, but around here they call it: 'The Silent House.'"

Captain Winsford got up and strolling to the French-window looked out.

"It is a quiet show, isn't it? Why, an army could hide in these grounds. Most appropriate name. Don't think I ever struck a house more—more *still*. Uncannily so."

"What you want," announced Captain Barty didactically, "is a drink. So do I."

Winsford smiled and turned back into the room again.

"Could you get us something to drink, Benson? Beer or. . . ."

". . . whisky and soda," Captain Barty assisted.

Benson bowed: "Perhaps you'd prefer a bottle of champagne, sir. There's a cellar full of everything here. Mr. Winsford was very careful about his drink, sir. The very best and *plenty* of it, was his motto," he added significantly.

Captain Barty opened his mouth to speak but closed it again in silence. He caught his friend's eye. It was very palpable that Benson's casual suggestion had knocked him flat. Neither had it been altogether without its effect upon the more solid member of the *duo*. When they recovered their equanimity Benson had left the room.

"My—my dear old boy!" gasped Barty. "You've hopelessly under-estimated our wealth! I wouldn't take one hundred thousand pounds for our property."

Winsford looked around again at the French-windows. There was a perplexed look upon his pleasant-looking face.

"Somehow," he said, "I could wish it were not so—so deadly still—so Silent Housish. You know what I mean. It's—it's creepily quiet."

Captain Barty laughed scornfully. "Let's see," he cogitated deeply. "Must get back to Town to-night: suppin' a wench. To-morrow, Phyllis lunch, Mary tea, Gertrude dinner. Supper, I just forget the hen's name, but nice lass. I'll try and get down the next day or the day after that. Don't worry, old cock. We'll soon settle the creeps. I'll bring a few girls down," he promised. "They'll buck it up."

"One hundred thousand pounds," said Winsford musingly, looking around him.

Again Captain Barty raised that deprecating hand.

"One hundred and *fifty* thousand, old boy," he corrected. "Don't run our property down." He sighed dolefully. "If I could only show my creditor birds even a *little tinge* of the colour of it, they'd chirp like nightingales."

Winsford sat up: "Well, why not?" he suggested matily. "I'll give you a cheque if you like." He took a cheque book from his pocket and opened it. "Haven't used this for Lord knows how long," he remarked. "Some time since there's been a bean in the bank. Be all right after to-day, though. Five hundred do?"

At which query Captain Barty bucked up tremendously.

"Topping," he hastened to answer. "I'll give you an I. O. U. for it."

From his pocket he took what appeared to be a betting

book, tore a page from it and wrote feverishly. The Crœsus of the pair stared at him in considerable surprise.

"Whatever for?" he inquired perplexedly. "Shall I get the money back?"

"Of course not," his friend replied, evidently equally astonished by any such suggestion. "But, dammit, we must be business-like."

With intense solemnity the papers were exchanged.

Engaged in this business neither was aware of the noiseless entrance into the room of the small Ho-fang. He came between them and, with intense solemnity of feature, knelt at the feet of Captain Barty and three times made deep obeisance. In a condition of complete paralysis of mind that mercurial youth surveyed him through his monocle.

"You all-slame Clap'in Winsfor'?" Ho-fang asked in hushed tones.

"*Me?*" gasped the person addressed. "Good lor' no!" He pointed at his staring companion. "That's the lucky individual!"

Turning, the small Chinaman repeated his profound salutation. Considerably embarrassed, Winsford addressed him.

"I sap, old chap! Er—what I mean to say—really . . ."

Ho-fang arose and gazed upon him reverently.

"Me, all-slame Ho-fang," he informed them. "Me all slame life-slervan' Mlisser Winsfor'—me, all-slame life-slervan' *you*. *Hoki!*" Again he bowed deeply.

Light dawned upon old Richard Winsford's heir.

"I see. You were my uncle's personal servant?"

"*Hoki*. Ho-fang blin' Mlisser Winsfor's slervan' allee time. All slame Ho-fang small bloy, plenny mluch hungry

in Hanoi. Mlisser Winsfor' plenny mluch kind to Ho-fang. Ho-fang, his slervant. Mlisser Winsfor' he glo along his fathers—Ho-fang you slervan' now. Ho-fang do that all ttime you live. Allee ttime till . . ."

"Till *he* meets with an accident," suggested Captain Barty helpfully.

Steadily and seriously Ho-fang regarded him.

"*Hoki*," he answered cryptically, and turned again to his self-appointed master.

"Ho-fang all-slame know your elemy," he continued solemnly. From his sleeve he drew that same glittering blade which had its baptism of blood in the burning go-down upon the Son-ka river. The eyes of his listeners fixed upon it fascinatedly. "All slame, Ho-fang *killum!*" Once again he gave that vivid pantomimic delineation of the horrible disembowelling stroke, just as years ago, he had done to the uncle of the man he was addressing; then turned and moved noiselessly to the curtained opening. "*Hoki!*" he uttered solemnly and vanished.

He left behind him two persons in a condition of complete mental and physical petrification.

CHAPTER IX

DOCTOR CHAN-FU OF THE RED HOUSE, BARNES

IT was over a glass of a sound vintage wine, at which Captain Barty sipped and sighed ecstatically, that George Winsford reverted again to an indelible impression which the mysterious Ho-fang had left upon his mind. A very serious impression, moreover; one that not all the care-free inanities of his friend could altogether remove.

"Didn't quite understand what Ho-fang was getting at with regard to my enemies," he remarked thoughtfully. "*I haven't any enemies.*"

He turned sharply to find the impassive Benson at his elbow, in his hand the salver of office. Upon it was a visiting card which Winsford picked up and glanced at. The eyes of the butler were upon him covertly.

"'Doctor Chan-fu. The Red House, Barnes,' " he read. "To see me?"

"Yes, sir. A Chinese gentleman, sir. Big friend of your uncle's in the East."

"Right ho. Show the doctor in at once."

The ten years had not taken great toll of the Mandarin Chan-fu since that terrible night in the temple of Yunnan. It had matured him, added some little perhaps to the dignity of his carriage, matured by time the high-bred expression of his lean, aquiline face. For the rest, but that

his once inky-black hair was grey at the temples, that those strange, penetrating eyes of his were softened by spectacles, he might still have been that young Chan-fu who had welcomed two white men into his father's ancient city—and had been so cruelly repaid. As ever, his clothes—the morning dress of convention—were perfection.

Closely behind him stalked silently a huge figure in Chinese dress who dwarfed even the burliness of the manservant, Benson. A mute, sphinx-faced figure, of whom in the Chinese city they would have shudderingly whispered that he was Hwang, the terrible Hereditary Executioner and Torturer to the Mandarins Chan-fu. As Chan-fu entered with the perfect poise of a well-bred man of the world, the great mute stood at one side of the door. Without move of facial muscle Chan-fu gave his hat and stick to Benson, whose immobility was little less than his own. He came forward, bowed to both men; instantly, in some strange, inexplicable way the room became charged with an electric tenseness. In his always perfect English, Chan-fu asked a question.

“Captain Winsford?”

In his frank, hearty manner, Winsford came forward and offered his hand: Chan-fu shook it cordially.

“I must apologize for intruding upon you, Captain Winsford, but I was a very great friend of your uncle. That must be my excuse.”

“Don't mention it. Won't you sit down? Oh,” he suddenly recollected, “this is my friend, Captain Barty.”

At which introduction Chan-fu bowed towards that slightly-staring young man who, however, responded coolly.

Leisurely Chan-fu took an armchair in the centre of the room.

"Er—try something?" Winsford indicated the tray and glasses upon the table.

Chan-fu shook his head gravely.

"Thank you—no," he answered.

Winsford, turning, met the stony, set orbs of the great mute upon him. Something in their fixed gaze made him feel uncomfortable.

"Er—your friend?" he murmured, again indicating the refreshment.

For one instant in the inscrutable eyes of the visitor, there showed a sudden gleam. In the next it had vanished. Chan-fu regarded his host with perfect placidity.

"My servant," he explained quietly. "A deaf-mute who accompanies me everywhere." Turning his chair he signalled quickly. The prodigious figure at once went to the long window and moved out into the garden.

"Sort of body-guard?" ventured Captain Barty, inquiringly.

Chan-fu smiled.

"Scarcely. I brought Hwang to this country for a special purpose—a very special purpose indeed." A strange inflection crept again into his voice, the sudden flash showed again, but only for a split-second, in the dark, oblique eyes.

Captain Barty, watching him closely, caught both—and wondered what the devil they portended.

"Your uncle and I," Chan-fu began, "were friends of many years' standing—both here and in the East. You—you are expecting a considerable legacy, Captain?"

Winsford shrugged his shoulders.

"Haven't the faintest idea, really. But as I am the heir, well, I'm hopeful. I'm expecting the solicitor chap any moment now."

"You mean Mr. Herrington?" Chan-fu asked interestedly.

"You know him?"

Chan-fu shook his head negatively.

"Personally—no. But I have been in communication with him upon a certain matter I *hope* to find mentioned in your late uncle's will. He informed me that he had no objection to my being present to-day, provided"—he smiled deprecatingly—"that you, as the heir, also agreed."

"My dear Doctor, I haven't the slightest objection," Winsford laughingly assured him.

"Suppose," put in the unconquerable Barty, "you tell us what you expect to find in the old chap's will?"

The deep, inscrutable eyes of Chan-fu turned upon him slowly; the faintest ironic tinge crept into his voice.

"Nothing of any value, I can assure you, Captain Barty. Simply some scientific papers he possessed that he knew I wanted badly, and which he promised me."

"My dear Doctor," Winsford said heartily, "I'll get Herrington to hand them over to you, right away."

"Provided, of course, that they're left to you in the will," added Captain Barty concisely.

Chan-fu smiled dubiously.

"Ah," he said thoughtfully, that is the point upon which I am doubtful. Towards the end . . . just before his untimely . . ."

"Accident," suggested Barty helpfully

"Yes . . . his accident, my old friend began to be, in some ways, peculiar. I called, and he seemed to forget things. I fear he may also have forgotten to mention these papers in his will. Also, I am afraid that they will not be in his solicitor's possession to hand over. They are far more likely to be here, somewhere."

"Well, if they're here, you shall have them," Winsford promised.

"Always providin', of course, that they're of no financial value to us," supplemented his friend adamantly.

Winsford regarded his friend scathingly.

"My good Barty," he demanded, "what the devil good are scientific papers to us?"

"Y' never know," said that imperturbable person, "we might have a dab at science ourselves one of these fine days."

"Rats!" was the uninviting retort. Winsford turned again to Chan-fu.

"My dear Doctor, if there are any purely scientific documents in this house that you want, you shall have them. Ho-fang may know where they are."

For some few seconds the recipient of this gift seemed in the faintest degree nonplussed.

"Ho-fang," he repeated thoughtfully, "A fellow-countryman of mine?"

"Yes."

"Perfectly priceless old sportsman," supplemented Captain Barty. "Amateur butcher in his spare time, I think."

Chan-fu leaned towards his host.

"You trust Ho-fang?" he asked quietly.

"Yes—why not?"

"Your uncle did not," Chan-fu informed him impressively. "That I know. Ho-fang more than once threatened him."

Winsford frowned.

"But he seems such a nice little cuss," he said. "I quite took to Ho-fang at first sight."

Chan-fu smiled—a dry enigmatic movement of the lips. He shook his head.

"The Western mind cannot comprehend the Eastern," he said.

"H'm. Barty, my lad, we'll have to walk warily."

Again Chan-fu leaned forward, surveying both men interestedly.

"You will pardon me," he said, "but you two gentlemen seem very great friends. Is Captain Barty to stay here?"

"I shift in at the very first possible moment," Captain Barty very definitely assured him.

Whatever response there might have been in the mind of Chan-fu to make to this information, it was never uttered, for at that moment the bell in the hall rang out loudly, and Benson rapidly crossed to the door in answer to it.

"And that," exclaimed Captain Winsford with barely suppressed excitement, "will probably be Mr. Herrington himself."

Captain Barty got up, adjusted his tie, smoothed his hair, and, in general, glossed himself up in expectation.

"Let's hope he's brought some of the boodle in his bally bag," he observed hopefully.

Mr. Herrington proved to be a stoutish, middle-aged man who gave the impression that during his waking hours he was invariably in a devil of a hurry. There was that in his brisk, alert manner which said: "I am Herrington and Roe; minutes are gold to me, therefore let there be no minutes of mine wasted." With the alacrity of a conjuror he thrust all his impedimenta, save one small old-fashioned hand-bag, into Benson's hands, and was well into the room and bowing briskly all around before that astonished servitor had even time to announce him.

"Captain Winsford?" he inquired, as though speech

were a missile to be shot at the nearest animate object.

The rightful owner of the cognomen came forward.

"My name, Mr. Herrington. My friend, Captain Barty. And this is Doctor Chan-fu."

The legal gentleman acknowledged the introduction in the same rapid-fire method that, seemingly, he did everything else. At Chan-fu, however, he cast a quick glance over his pince-nez.

"Oh yes, yes, yes. You wrote me, Doctor, I remember. And you wanted . . ."

"I have explained the situation to our young friend," Chan-fu intervened suavely.

Mr. Herrington turned upon Winsford.

"And you have no objection to his presence?" he fired at him.

"None whatever. Moreover, I promised the Doctor that he could have these papers; and, if you hadn't got them, he could hunt around. That's in order, isn't it?"

Mr. Herrington rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Yes," he snapped after a moment, "I see no reason why not."

"Right. Then stay and hear the excitement, Doctor."

Mr. Herrington, busily engaged in opening his bag, blinked over his glasses at the parties concerned.

"Though as far as that goes," he remarked briskly, "I can put Doctor Chan-fu out of all doubt at once. His name is not mentioned in any shape or form in the will of our late client, Richard Winsford."

CHAPTER X

THE STRANGE WILL OF A STILL STRANGER MAN

“**T**HE will,” began Mr. Herrington, as one about to engage in a verbal race, “is one of the briefest and most incontestable I have ever had to handle.”

He adjusted his pince-nez, snapped the document open, and began to read :

“Dated the first day of June 1926. The Last Will and Testament of Richard Winsford of Barnes Common in the County of Surrey. I hereby will and bequeath all my personal property and possessions to my nephew, George Arundel Winsford.”

For a moment he broke off, glanced at Winsford, then resumed rapidly.

“Subject to the conditions hereinunder set forth. That from the income derived from investments in the hands of my solicitors he shall pay to the Seaman’s Hospital the sum of Two Hundred Pounds per annum. It is also a condition of this will that my nephew shall live in the house at Barnes Common and that he shall not attempt to sell it, no matter what his financial circumstances may be.

“Further, he shall continue to engage and maintain my two

servants, Joseph Benson and the Chinaman Ho-fang. Should he discover them in any overt act of treachery of which the proof is clear, he may discharge them from his service—not otherwise.

"Should the conditions of this will be left unfulfilled, the whole of my estate to be realized by the Trustee, Mr. Jacob Herrington, and be devoted to charities. Such charities to be at his entire discretion.

"Given under my hand and seal this first day of June, nineteen hundred and twenty-six.

"Signed, Richard Winsford and duly witnessed."

"And what," inquired the sole legatee, "is the amount of the income derived from my uncle's investments, Mr. Herrington?"

The lawyer did not at once reply. Instead, he took from his bag another document and opened it.

"One moment, Captain Winsford," he requested. "There is another paper which it was your late uncle's wish should be mentioned to you at the same time as his will was read."

Winsford regarded the document askance.

"I say, Mr. Herrington, you read it," he begged. "I'm not much good at that sort of thing."

"As you please, Captain Winsford, as you please. I don't really think," he further admonished, "that you should take the following letter *too* seriously. Candidly, I think it is—er . . ."

"Piffle?" suggested Captain Barty who was following matters with the keenest attention.

"For want of a better term," responded the legal luminary coldly, "'piffle' will describe it."

Doctor Chan-fu uttered his first syllable since the proceedings commenced.

"My old friend," he said softly, "was decidedly—*peculiar*."

The lawyer eyed him over his pince-nez.

"To say he was *peculiar* is to put it mildly. My personal opinion is that he was—I won't say *mad*—but certainly slightly—er—um . . ."

"Potty?" supplied the uncrushable Captain Barty triumphantly.

"Potty will cover it," agreed Mr. Herrington. "However, when this letter is read, I will give you all particulars that are in my possession." He opened the epistle and commenced. "Ahem!"

"To my nephew, I feel it a solemn duty to add, for your safety, a warning. For . . ."

A strange, a weird Chinese chant floated out into the room. Its mournful, slowly-intoned cadences sounded, to Western ears, at least, horribly harsh and discordant. Yet through it there was a plainly manifest rhythm, a melody by turns both pathetic and sinister—in the raucous voice chanting it, it became at times literally awesome.

"What in God's name is that?" demanded the reader testily, putting down his letter. He looked decidedly startled.

"If that's Ho-fang givin' us a bit of Chinese opera," commented Captain Barty severely, "he wants sending up before the Stewards."

Winsford shook his head.

"Don't rot about it, Barty," he said quietly. "I'll bet it means something to him—and something pretty terrible. It has just the same effect on me as . . ."

"As what?" demanded his *confrère*.

"Nothing. At least, never mind, just now."

But one man there sat listening to it with rigid body and set face—Doctor Chan-fu. As it progressed he might have been graven out of stone. To Captain Barty, whose wandering eye fell upon the unnaturally immobile figure, he seemed *too* still altogether. There was something in this stomach-ache lilt of Ho-Fang's: something that, well, something that bally well meant *something*.

"Happen to know what the merry little song's all about?" he inquired of the Doctor calmly.

The sphinx-like face turned towards him.

"Oh yes," Chan-fu answered quietly. "It is the death-song of the river-men of the *Thao Song Cai*, mistakenly called by your Western geographers, the Son-Ka River."

"Sounds a bonny place," returned Captain Barty. "I do *not* think—*papa!*"

Chan-fu smiled grimly.

"Amongst ourselves," he said, "it is known as the Red River—the River of Blood."

The song stopped suddenly.

"Are we," demanded Mr. Herrington with considerable asperity, "gathered here to listen to a dissertation on Chinese music and geography? Or to hear the last wishes of the deceased?"

Barty waved a hand.

"My error, dear old pip," he responded cheerfully. "Let's get back to the dear departed."

Mr. Herrington, not without something remarkably like a snort, continued his reading.

"For years my life has been threatened by a ruthless and implacable enemy. I came to this country to feel safe from him; but I now know that there is no such safety, go where I will. That is the reason why I have shut myself up in this house alone. My partner and I did him a wrong for which he

never forgave us. I took something from my enemy which he prized beyond all things. He took from my partner that which was dearer to him than life, then had him killed. For myself, I escaped, taking with me that thing he valued. This he has sworn upon the graves of his forefathers to recover, and not rest until he saw me and mine, crushed, ruined and dead. To gain both he will not stop at murder—at cruelties such as you have never dreamed of. I urge you to beware of him. If danger threatens, go to Ho-fang. Trust and depend upon him implicitly. Remember my warning.

Your uncle—Richard Winsford."

Mr. Herrington carefully folded the paper and, without comment, replaced it in his bag. From the Doctor, who had listened with that same sphinx-like intentness, there came one long-drawn "Ah." The heir of the author of this extraordinary epistle was frankly amazed: as to Captain Barty his expression suggested that for the moment he was a man mentally overpowered.

"There's one thing, Doctor," Winsford mentioned after a moment's troubled pause, "my uncle seemed to trust Ho-fang after all."

"The wanderings," replied Chan-fu, "of a disordered and diseased mind."

Winsford appealed to the solicitor.

"What was his enemy's name?"

"Haven't the *remotest* idea—he doesn't say."

"And whatever it was that this enemy seeks. What was that?"

"Never heard of it," answered the solicitor with the utmost casualness.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" the heir of this apparently deadly feud gasped.

Captain Philip Barty came out of his trance.

"Bughouse, Winnie!" he exclaimed. "Bughouse, undoubtedly."

"It is certainly a remarkable communication," continued Mr. Herrington in his briskest non-stop manner. "You asked me just now, the amount to which you become entitled through investments in my hands. I can give you the figure, offhand. In addition to the freehold of this house and estate—which, by the way, you must live in and are not permitted to sell under any circumstances—the moneys invested by your uncle return an income of *five hundred pounds per annum*."

A strained, a stricken look came into the face of George Winsford. Captain Barty opened his mouth to speak but no words issued from it.

"Five—hundred—pounds per . . ."

"You mean per *week*, Herry old thing," Captain Barty suggested palpitatingly. "Per *week*—surely?"

"*Five hundred pounds per annum*," repeated Mr. Herrington adamantly. And added: "Of course you are pledged to pay two hundred per annum to the Seaman's Hospital. Also keep the butler, Benson, and the Chinaman. Now, to pay these legacies, the taxes, house bills etc., I shouldn't think you'd need more than another five hundred a year to see you comfortably through. Scarcely a matter for congratulation, Captain."

"Don't be funny, Herrington," Winsford murmured wearily.

The lawyer drew himself up and surveyed the party.

"*But*," he proceeded, "that is not *all* the property belonging to the late Richard Winsford."

"Eh!" ejaculated Captains Winsford and Barty as one man.

Some years ago, acting under stress—candidly, I

think a terrible fear—Mr. Winsford converted some very valuable property he had, in fact most of his huge fortune, into negotiable bonds payable to bearer on or before a given date."

Upon which information Captain Barty gazed first at his friend and then at the speaker, in an even greater bewilderment than before—if that were possible.

"What the devil does he mean? Translate it into English, Herry!"

"Negotiable bonds that the bearer can take and cash as he would a five pound note," obliged Mr. Herrington, and in a tone which seemed to suggest that the words "You infernal idiot!" had, most unaccountably, been overlooked in his answer. "The bonds," he went on, "are still in existence."

"Where?" It was George Winsford who inquired, and in a slightly tremulous voice.

Herrington shook his head.

"That I cannot tell you. I should say that they are in this house *somewhere*."

"And what," asked Captain Winsford in a repressed tone, "what is the amount—invested or whatever it is—in these missing bonds."

"Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds," he was informed in a voice befitting the solemnity of the statement. "*A quarter of a million sterling!* And I must warn you that the last day for negotiation of the bonds is September the twenty-sixth of this year—three days from today!"

Richard Winsford's heir was regarding him strangely.

"And—and suppose the bonds are not found in that time?"

"Then you, Captain Winsford, will be a quarter of a million the poorer. If they are not negotiated before noon of September the twenty-sixth, the money will go to a charity."

"You—you're quite positive of the date?"

"Absolutely." The finality of the reply left no room for any shadow of doubt. "Well, I must be getting back to town, Captain. Call upon me for ready money if you want it."

Captain Winsford breathed a faint sigh of relief.

"Oh, there is some ready money, is there?"

Mr. Herrington referred rapidly to his pocket book.

"In the bank," he imparted, "there is eleven pounds, eight shillings and sevenpence."

A groan from two stunned men greeted this information. Mr. Herrington looked at them over his pince-nez.

"I shouldn't worry too much about those bonds," he advised in a kindly tone. "They'll turn up right enough."

"But suppose someone else finds them?"

The solicitor eyed him gravely.

"Then they'll be a quarter of a million richer," he replied flatly.

The soft inquiring voice of Chan-fu broke silence for the first time since the amount of the deceased man's actual possessions had been mentioned.

"I understand you that the person in whose hands they are upon that date—three days from now—can cash them?" he inquired interestedly of the solicitor.

"Certainly. They're Bonds-to-Bearer. Whoever presents them is the bearer."

"Very interesting," murmured Chan-fu; "very interesting indeed." He moved thoughtfully up towards the win-

dow and summoned the huge mute from the garden.

Mr. Herrington glanced at his watch, snapped it to again truculently.

"Well, I must be going. I'm in a most *frightful* hurry." He made his *adieux* and was dashing for the door when the Doctor intercepted him.

"My car is waiting and I am going townwards. Can I give you a lift?"

"I'd be awfully obliged."

"Delighted! Good-bye for the present, Captain Winsford. I hope to have the pleasure of coming again soon."

"Eh!" Captain Winsford came out of a fit of abstraction with a start. "Oh, yes, those scientific papers. Come and look for them at any time, Doctor."

Chan-fu bowed deeply.

"Thank you," he said. "I will. Good afternoon, Captain Bart."

"Bye-bye, bye-bye," returned the Captain moodily.

Alone, Winsford sank wearily into his chair. Captain Bart, after a prolonged examination of the inside of the chimney from which he emerged, none the richer but considerably the sootier, looked upon his dejected figure. Then from his pocket he took the recently acquired cheque, crossed the room and silently handed it back. As silently, Captain Winsford returned the I. O. U. of his friend.

"Jolly decent of you, Bart," he said moodily, "to pay me back so soon."

Captain Bart sighed.

"Not at all Winnie, old boy," he answered feelingly. "From what I can see of this legacy, *you need the money!*"

CHAPTER XI

IN WHICH TWO OLD FRIENDS MEET

“**T**HERE’S not a ha’porth of doubt about it,” said Captain Barty with a deep sigh, “this is a serious business, Winnie, old boy. What the old fool wanted to make a will like that for, beats me. What did he leave that potty letter for?”

“Don’t ask me,” answered his friend with a groan. “All I know is I’ve got a hospital, a Chinaman and an ex-pug on my hands. Also, that a fortune is hidden somewhere in this great house that has to be found within three days or it’s lost, so far as I’m concerned, for ever.”

“The thing we’ve got to do,” expressed Captain Barty determinedly, “is up and hunt these bally thingummies—bonds.”

Winsford shook his head depressedly.

“We’ll do our best, of course,” he agreed. “But our luck is dead out, and there’s so little time to do things.”

A thought of considerable brilliance occurred to the Captain. He brought his hands together in a most exuberant clap.

“I’ve got it! What about Ho-fang? D’ye think he . . .”

He halted, dead: there between them, and admiring Winsford, *was* Ho-fang. Where the deuce did he spring from . . . ?”

“You callum Ho-fang?”

Winsford, considerably surprised, shook his head negatively.

"No," he answered. "But since you are here . . ."

Ho-fang clapped his hands together sharply.

"You glo all-slame like that—all-slame Ho-fang clome."

"Oh, that's the idea is it? Right ho. Ho-fang, according to my uncle's will I'm in a bit of a mess. I've got to adopt you and leather-face, Benson, and I can't afford to keep you both."

Ho-fang pondered the doubtful information a moment. Then suddenly his face stretched into one of its widest grins.

"All-li," he said cheerfully. "Me killum Blenson." Suiting the action to the word, he began to move stealthily towards the domestic portion of the building. Quickly Winsford intercepted him.

"No," he said worriedly. "You mustn't do that."

Deep and grievous disappointment showed in every line of the small Chinaman's features. "Me mluch plenny like killum, Blenson," he urged.

Captain Winsford shook his head very decidedly.

"We can't allow that," he said finally. "But, you can help in another way, Ho-fang. We are looking for some papers."

"Plaper," repeated Ho-fang, his head cocked upon one side.

"Yes. Papers—old papers. Hidden somewhere about."

"Stowed away—as it were," assisted Captain Barty impressively.

"Papers. Muchee *important* papers!" Winsford, in his excitement, found himself bawling into the ear of his small retainer.

"Mlutchee old plapers?" Ho-fang responded amiably.

"Y E S!!"

Ho-fang beamed his very brightest.

"You wantum mluch plenny ole plapers?" he again questioned, evidently urged by a whole-hearted desire to get this business right.

The affirmative which answered him might have been emitted by two megaphones in full blast. Very quietly he walked towards the curtained door through which he usually effaced himself, turned upon the threshold, and grinned benignly upon them.

"All-li," he said, and passed from vision.

"Perfect scream, isn't he?" observed Captain Barty.

"Yes, but just fancy if he *does* know where those infernal . . ." A sudden crash of glass stopped him. "What the deuce was that?" he questioned.

They stood perfectly still. Slowly a hand—a woman's hand—came through a broken pane of the French-window, unlatched it from the inside, and the person it belonged to came with peculiarly even, regular steps into the room. She was a beautiful, dark-haired, dark-eyed young woman, little more than a girl, whose soft face was set in one fixed, strained expression. She came slowly forward, her hands stretched before her, her eyes wide and expressionless—almost like those of some unfortunate somnambulist walking abroad in her sleep. They saw that she was well, indeed richly dressed; in fact, showed every outward attribute of a woman of means, taste and refinement. Of all the strange things this house of mystery had unfolded to its new master in little more than an hour, this beautiful advent was most certainly the strangest.

Captain Barty was the first to break the spell of silence that had fallen with her mysterious appearance.

"Er—good afternoon."

Their strange visitor took no notice of him whatever, but stopped, staring; her great eyes fixed intently upon something not visible to either of her watchers.

Winsford moved forward and addressed her diffidently.

"If you are calling upon me," he suggested, "I'm Captain Winsford."

Her eyes never moving from that fixed stare, she repeated the name in an accent of sheer horror. He came a little towards her—instantly she shrank back. Fear, unmistakable fear blanched her face.

"Winsford!" she breathed. "That terrible name!" She shrank back in abject loathing and disgust. "No, no, no, *don't! Don't!* I'm going where you sent me!" The cry now was one of mortal terror.

Winsford, with a face suddenly gone nearly as white as her own, approached her.

"My dear young lady," he said quietly. "There's—there's some ghastly mistake, I assure you."

Captain Barty, his usually placid orbs bulging from his head, lent his assistance.

"The—the wrong house, possibly?"

But this strange girl—her eyes still in that un-flickering fixed stare—moved her head negatively.

"No," she answered in a shuddering whisper. "This is the house. I have seen it so often when he orders. The Silent House on the Common. The House of Death—and worse." Again, with sudden frantic terror, she shrank further still away from Winsford. "Keep away from me—don't beat me, don't beat me! I'll try to do what you want!" Feverishly, she turned towards the great, carved mantel. "They are here, but I can't go nearer. They are protected by *death!*"

Into the room floated once more that weird, horrible music of Ho-fang's. At the sound of it she stiffened, her eyes closed slowly and she staggered! "The Voice!" she cried. "The *Voice*!" Then swayed and would have fallen but for Winsford springing to her aid. Over her fainting figure both men stared aghast at one another.

"Bart, there's something seriously wrong here," Winsford said slowly.

Slowly, very slowly the girl opened her eyes and stared about her strangely. A puzzled, almost frightened, look came into her extraordinarily large and limpid eyes. She looked from one to the other of the two men in bewilderment.

"What am I doing here?" she asked them frightenedly.

Winsford smiled kindly at her.

"Now, as to that we can't enlighten you. Perhaps if you were to tell us your name, we might be able to help."

Her fine brows drew down into a frown.

"My name," she murmured, then stopped, palpably racking at her memory. "I—I can't remember." She turned to Winsford. "Who are you?" she asked him.

"My name is Winsford—George Winsford."

Again that heavy frown appeared between her eyes; again the strained look of terror sprang into them.

"Winsford—yes—that is the name. He said Winsford would beat me—torture me. But you won't,"—she pleaded with the simplicity of a child—"you are kind, and I do not feel afraid of you. You will not beat or torture me, will you?"

Winsford ground his teeth. A particularly unpleasant look came into his good-looking face.

"Who tells you all this?" he asked quietly.

She crept closer to him, peering about and around her nervously.

"The man who has charge of my soul," she whispered him. "When he wills that I shall go anywhere, I go. When he orders my mind to do anything, I must do it. He sent me here for something—I have no memory now for what it was. When I am awake everything goes from me. The Voice woke me!"

Winsford looked at her perplexedly for a moment.

"Do you mean that Chinese song?" he questioned.

"Yes. It always does—it seems as if it is stronger than his power over me. Then I awake."

"Always? Then you've heard it a good many times?"

"From a little child, many years ago. It seems to have to do with a great wide river. And many men coming in boats at night chanting it. Cruel men, who killed and tortured. And a great fire blazing and"—she shook her head piteously—"after that I awake and I can remember nothing. It seems as if, from the coming of those men and the hearing of that terrible song upon the river my memory has been in chains."

"You—you're quite sure you feel better now?" he asked solicitously.

She gave him a wan smile.

"Oh yes, thank you. And I know that I am here in The Silent House—and that you are George Winsford. And I know that you are not cruel and terrible, but kind. I shall never forget that."

"That's a ton better!" he told her cheerfully. "Where have you come from now?"

"I could show you," she began moving up to the long windows to the garden, he following her. Suddenly, with horror-stricken eyes, she stopped him with a gesture of

renewed terror. "Keep back," she whispered quickly. "Keep back, for God's sake! I must go."

Without another word she darted through the window. Winsford, slipping into the garden an instant later, found her vanished completely. No traces of her going could he find in any direction.

Returning in a decidedly puzzled frame of mind, he found his comrade sprawled in the most comfortable chair he could find and sampling another of the late Winsford's *Corona-Corona's*.

"That's the most extraordinary thing, Barty," he exclaimed. "There's not a sign of her anywhere!"

Captain Barty whistled to himself a sprightly little Jazz tune for a moment, then grinned across at his disgruntled friend.

"That's what I call a damn'd smart trick," he observed placidly; and went on to give an imitation of their singular visitor. "You won't beat me!" he mimicked. "You . . ."

"What the hell d'ye mean?" snapped the other savagely.

"Any dam'd fool could see what she was after. You're the heir to a rich man, my lad, and that was a clever trick to get to know you."

Captain George Winsford flung himself down in the opposite chair and favoured his friend with anything but a pleasant look.

"Oh, shut up!" he requested blackly. In the hall the door bell sounded furiously. "Now who the devil is this, I wonder?" he grunted.

"D'you know," observed Captain Barty nonchalantly, "I'm beginning to think we're going to have some fun in this crib."

Benson entered and presented his new master with a

card. As he glanced at it, the eyes of the servant shot quickly about the room.

"Señhor Leon Peroda of Annam," read Captain Winsford frowningly; then turned to Benson. "Who is this gentleman?" he inquired.

"A foreigner, sir. Says he's come thousands of miles to see you."

"P'raps he can throw some light on the—er—the doin's," suggested Captain Barty hopefully.

"Right ho, Benson. Show the gentleman in."

As with Chan-fu, time had dealt very gently with the unspeakable Señhor. Certainly, his skin had gone several shades more sallow, his dull, fishy eyes protruded a little further from under their heavy lids. Also he was unquestionably oilier—greasier in appearance. But he was still remarkably dapper in appearance, and his sleek, black, curly hair was still without trace of grey in it. As regarded the gentleman's inner qualities—or lack of them—there was no change whatsoever. As he advanced, the slow, fishy eyes kept moving from one part of the room to the other. Anyone intimately acquainted with him—Richard Winsford, for instance—would have divined instantly that he was both worried and looking for something—or someone.

Not being so acquainted, the two gentlemen who got up and bowed as he entered, merely perceived that in the visitor they beheld a man who bore all the earmarks of an utter and unmitigated blackguard. Deeply the Señhor bent in return.

"I am Leon Peroda," he informed them. "I com' from Annam."

"How d'ye do," Winsford greeted wonderingly. "Er—

hope you've had a good trip. Who is it you wish to see?"

"Weensfor'," the Portuguese spat, in just his old way, through the side of his mouth. "Richar' Weensfor'."

"If you mean my uncle, I'm afraid you're rather late. He's dead."

"Dead! No! No! 'E cannot be!"

"*And* buried," added Captain Barty, in a tone of complete conviction.

The Señor's slow eyes searched them both; then from them moved ceaselessly, searchingly about the room.

"So," he emitted softly. "The blight of the Star, eet fall on him at las' . . . yees?" He addressed himself to both and was obviously awaiting an answer. He did not look at them however; his eyes still invaded every wall and corner, and by no means as dully as they looked to be.

"Star," repeated Winsford. "Star. Oh dear no. Something much more substantial than a star landed on the poor old chap. A coping-stone, to be exact."

The Señor turned the dull eyes upon him.

"You do not know of the Star?" he drawled gently. "Not 'eard of eet pr'aps . . . noo?"

"Can't say I have. Perhaps you'll explain, sir."

But it was inevitable that the Señor Peroda should be suspicious—knowing himself, the Señor put no trust in any man.

"There has been some other to ask after it—yees?" he queried insidiously. "A gentleman of my nation—Portuguese? Noo?" Again the dull eyes wandered about the room. "A gentleman called Señor Mateo? Yees . . . noo?"

Winsford shook his head very positively.

"No one of that name been here," he assured the visitor.

The information seemed to nonplus him considerably. He covertly eyed the two men watching him, but could find nothing in any way suspicious in their attitude. The Señor swiftly decided upon a new line. He drew himself up determinedly.

"I com' from Annam to re-cover the for-tune?" he snapped suddenly. "I spik," he went on, "of the for-tune of Richar' Weensfor'. Vere ees eet?"

"That's what we want to know," the heir to this most unsubstantial heritage informed him grimly. "*Where is it?*"

A certain truculence showed instantly in Peroda's attitude.

"Señhors," he warned scowlingly, "you do not know of the danger you run. I warn you that eet will be better for you to geeve up the papers Weensfor' leave—to *me*. Eef you are wise you weel give the Star to eets rightful owner." The threat behind his words was unmistakable.

Winsford stiffened.

"I haven't got any papers—or Star," he said shortly.

"And why the devil should we give them to you—anyway?" demanded Captain Barty, equally abruptly.

The Señor changed his tactics. He had met these hell-accursed hard-fisted 'Englishmen before. The nephew, aroused, might prove to be such another as his uncle. No good that—*nombre di Dios, noo!*"

"Señhor," he addressed Winsford propitiatingly. "Half of thees fortune of your uncle was stole. Eet belonged to someone who—who entered cento a certain theeng wit' heem and was killed. Eet should 'ave gone to a young ladee I 'ave the honour to represen'. 'E, Weens-

for', steal 'er wealth—escape to thees country an' change it into papers. Geeve to me those papers, Señhors, and I go."

Winsford turned from him in annoyance.

"I've already told you," he said succinctly, "that I haven't got any papers. My uncle has apparently hidden them somewhere. When they are found—and I'm satisfied that the claim of the lady you represent is a just one—we can talk business. Not before. As for the Star, I haven't even the remotest idea of what you're talking about. What is it?"

Peroda did not immediately answer. The dull eyes moved with much greater rapidity than usual around the room. To Winsford, watching him, it occurred that in the matter of this mysterious Star—the Señhor Leon Peroda was a decidedly scared man. In the side glance he caught from Captain Barty, it was evident that he, too, read the situation with much the same result.

The Señhor came closer and spoke in little more than a whisper.

"You are sure," he questioned keenly, "that there has been no one 'ere yet for eet? No man . . ." he watched them cunningly . . . "or *woman*?" His question was answered with a stony silence. "Oh, yees," he went on slowly to himself, then turned swiftly on Winsford. "Deed she get what she came for?" he demanded, and again there was menace in his voice.

Winsford looked at him contemptuously and ignored his question.

"You haven't told us about the Star yet. What is it?"

The Señhor's eyes lit with that old red gleam.

"Something," he almost hissed, "that eef eet were mine

and you had eet, I, Leon Peroda, would tear you limb from limb to get eet back . . . yees!"

Winsford eyed him steadily.

"You start any tearing here, my friend," he admonished quietly, "and you'll get a thick ear."

Whatever answer, whether of wrath or diplomacy, was upon the tip of Peroda's tongue, it was never uttered.

From that curtained opening by which he had departed, there appeared the vision of Ho-fang struggling under a burden of old newspapers, pictorials, any and every form of journal in which is issued the printed word. From above his knees they piled to just under his chin.

"You wantum mluch plenny ol' plapers?" he beamed. "Mluch plenny . . ." And then the slant almond orbs fell upon the figure of the Senhor Leon Peroda. Their eyes met.

One strange, half-strangled, wholly inarticulate cry came from the suddenly frozen throat of that worthy. Not for one moment of the ten years which had passed, had he ever forgotten that small yellow fiend who had attacked him upon Richard Winsford's verandah; nor, if he lived to be a hundred, was he ever likely to.

Ho-fang, his eyes fixed upon his ancient enemy, dropped his burden with a heavy thud, then sprang across it at him. One piercing scream broke from the gentleman from Annam. Greenish white in colour, he sped for the window and out into the garden—the Chinaman but inches behind him. A shot rang out—another pane of the long window crashed. From Peroda there came another unearthly cry of terror. Two more shots barked—then silence! Running to the window, Captain Barty could see nothing of as-

sailed or assailant. He turned in mute amazement : equally astounded was the face of his friend.

"And they call this *The Silent House!*" he observed amazed. Then took a long, deep breath.

CHAPTER XII

IN WHICH A STRANGE CHAPTER OF ACCIDENTS COMMENCES

FOR the three days that ensued after this singular coming into his inheritance what Captain George Winsford did to the interior of the house on Barnes Common literally beggared description.

Captain Barty, having taken his departure early in the evening of the first day to continue his wild career of dining and wining the lady upon whom his fancy for the moment centred—not to mention others upon whom that vagrant fancy might reasonably be expected to centre in the near future—his friend had been left alone to the work.

But with the aid of Benson, an earnest indefatigable Benson who spared himself nothing in this business of search, the Silent House had been virtually dismantled. Not one cranny or crevice of the old house which had not received attention so drastic that it was questionable if it could ever be restored again to its pristine, mellow beauty. Panelling ripped down, mantels and chimney pieces subjected to such overhauling that never would they look the same again. Skirting-boards torn out and flung into the garden; not one piece of furniture but had not been ripped open and disembowelled to yield up their secrets. But, beyond a few odd pieces of money of every reign since "Good Queen Anne," nothing was there brought

to light. Of the elusive Bonds-to-Bearer, and still less of that mysterious Red Star, not the faintest trace had so far been unearthed. By the evening of the third day Captain Winsford, and in little less degree his insistent helper, had been reduced to moral and physical pulp.

Ho-fang, despite his eager attentions in any and every other direction, maintained an attitude of complete indifference towards what was in hectic progress. The greater part of his time seemed to be spent in prowling the grounds; but what particular object he had in view was kept securely locked in his own narrow bosom.

However, as though to make up for the utter lack of interest exhibited by his fellow servant, Benson had been a perfect brick. Let there be but the faintest mention of a new place to be tried, and very often pried into, and Benson was there itching to begin. Indeed many of the most likely spots had been his suggestion: places that would never have entered the mind of the new owner of the house.

But about the house there was to Winsford a steadily growing *aura* of chill mystery. Also things were happening—things that looked at in the cold light of reason were palpably pure accident. Yet always were they inimical to himself and no one else. But he made no mention of them—even to Benson or the prowling Ho-fang. Some intuition prevailed upon him to keep them entirely to himself.

Upon that beautiful, strained-faced, girl-woman who had come into his life upon the first day, he dwelt long and often. What was at the back of her? What influence was it that had impelled her into his house? And whose? And again—for what? Where was the connection between her and that ghastly song of the little Chinaman?

—the chant the Doctor had said was the death-song of the men of some Chinese river. And in her crippled mind and imprisoned memory *she* had associated it with a great river and death, and savage men in boats, and a great fire. It was all a strange mix-up—but she was very, very lovely and he gave much of his mind to the mystery of her. So much so, indeed, that at moments during the long, dreary, and baffling search, he found himself doing things quite mechanically.

And upon this early evening of the third day, dog-tired and worried as he was, he found it was far more of her that he was thinking than of even the failure of their joint efforts. Across the room from him, Benson was moving about like a man who has not slept for weeks.

“Tired, Benson?” he asked.

“Well, sir, we’ve been at this searching all the night before last, nearly all day yesterday, and since a quarter past four this morning.”

“It’s a devil of a job, Benson, but until to-morrow midday there’s hope. So we’ve got to stick it. After that . . .” he finished with a sigh.

He lit a cigarette and stood staring dispiritedly into the empty fireplace.

“Do you think there are any secret passages in this house, Benson?” he asked suddenly.

“Not that I know of, sir, but your uncle used to have special workmen here quite a lot.”

Winsford turned and regarded him acutely.

“To do what?”

Benson shook his head. “Don’t know, sir. I was never allowed to know.”

“Funny wasn’t it? Where did they work?”

“In here mostly, sir.”

"H'm. Sounds mysterious."

"There was one thing that *was* mysterious about this room, sir," Benson volunteered with most unusual garrulity. "And that was the way the late Mr. Winsford used to get in and out of it without being seen."

"Must have come and gone by the ordinary methods, Benson. Doors or windows."

"No, sir, he did *not*," objected Benson most positively. "That I can swear to. One day I came from my room,"—he jerked a thumb towards the curtained opening—"into this room. It was empty; don't forget that, sir; *empty*. I get to this table and a voice said: 'Benson.' I looked around and there he was, standing in front of the fireplace, sir. How did he get there?"

Winsford rubbed his chin thoughtfully with his hand and gave his mind to consideration of the problem Benson had propounded.

"That's funny," he said at length. "Dashed funny. And how *did* he get there?"

Again Benson shook his head.

"Don't ask me, sir. That's more than I can tell you—or anyone else in this house. But not through any door here—*or* window."

The front door bell sounded violently through the hall. "Who the devil's that?" Winsford demanded irritably. He picked the jacket of his dinner suit from the back of a wrecked chair and slipped it on.

In the hall he heard the cheerful voice of Captain Barty; a moment later Benson announced that peripatetic person. He was in full motoring kit.

"Now then, you blighter," Winsford hailed him grimly. "Where have you been the last two days?"

"Awfully sorry, old boy," the Captain apologized humbly, "but couldn't get down before."

"Take anything?"

"Thanks. Whisky and soda, Benson, please."

Winsford, considerably intrigued, indicated Captain Barty's motor outfit. "Why this rig out?" he inquired.

"I came in the car," he was informed.

"Whose?"

"Mine. I've bought one."

His host's eyes opened to their greatest possible size.

"You've . . . what did you use for money?" he asked facetiously.

Captain Barty grinned cheerfully.

"Our expectations, old son."

"In which case," his friend informed him in dead seriousness, "you'd better send it back."

The Captain sat back and stared at him in horror.

"But surely—surely you've found the gadgets by this time—the bonds?"

Very steadily Winsford eyed his startled questioner.

"Not one sign or trace of them," he answered concisely.

Captain Barty, first clutching at the whisky and soda Benson presented him with much as a drowning man might at a drifting spar, drank it in one gulp and replaced the glass upon the salver.

"But—but this is all piffle," he began fervidly. "The wretched things . . ."

"You can go, Benson," interjected Winsford quietly.

"What I mean to say, Winnie," went on the stricken gentleman when Benson had left the room, "they must be *somewhere!*"

"I don't think there's a bally inch of this place we haven't uprooted since you were here," Winsford told

him despondently. "Honestly, Bart, I'm losing hope."

"Brace up, old haricot," the other invited with as much cheerfulness as he could summon up at the moment.

"That's all very well, but you haven't spent three nights in this blooming house. I have."

Captain Barty pricked up his ears.

"What's wrong with it?" he demanded.

"Everything. Quiet as a grave all day, but at night—my hat!"

The Captain drew his chair a trifle closer. There was an extremely alert look upon his clear-cut face.

"At night? Well?"

"Bart," said Winsford seriously, "I'm dead sure that the whole place has been ransacked by someone every night after I've turned in."

"Who by?"

Winsford shrugged his shoulders.

"The enemy my uncle wrote about. That seems fairly obvious, doesn't it?"

"It does. In which case the old bloke was not so potty after all. Seen any of these searchin' blighters?"

"Not a sign, personally."

"Why didn't you let me know before?"

"Because I wasn't sure."

"You are now?"

"Absolutely."

Captain Barty sat back and digested this disturbing information.

"Y' know," he began suddenly, "there's some way in and out of this place that we don't know. That's a cert—just look at it. Take that girl—she slipped out into the garden and just mizzled. No other word for it—mizzled. Same with that yellow-belly, Peroda, when Ho-fang went

for him. In one second after they got through that window—gone! vanished! Bunked—in fact. They haven't tried any funny business with you, have they?"

"No," replied Winsford, a shade of doubt in his voice. "That is, I can't be quite sure; but I've narrowly missed one or two nasty accidents in these last two days. For one, a twenty-foot ladder crashed down and missed me by an inch to-day. No one near it, but there was a board so placed that if it were trodden on it would be sure to topple the ladder over. I trod on it."

"That all?"

"No. I had to go out for a few minutes yesterday and I'd scarcely got outside the gates when a big racing car doing fifty easily came right up the path after me. I jumped the ditch—but it was a narrow squeak."

"Skid perhaps?"

"No, Bart. A deliberate swerve at me. That car must have been laying in wait for me to come out."

"Does look like it, doesn't it? Nothing happened in the house?"

Winsford laughed.

"No. Except that Ho-fang has taken to sleeping outside my door at night. Hardly see him in the day at all."

"H'm." Captain Barty pondered deeply a moment. "Has that wart, Peroda of Annam, popped up since?"

"Not here," his friend informed him dryly. "But if it wasn't Peroda driving that car, I'll eat my hat."

"Ha! I'll look into him when I come back to-morrow."

"You're not staying now?" Winsford asked in some surprise.

"Sorry, old boy, but must pop back at once. Supping a lady to-night, but I'll be along for good in the morning."

Talking of ladies—seen any more of the beauteous maiden who dropped in under the influence?”

“No. But I’ve thought a good bit about her since. I believe she was hypnotized.”

Captain Bart grinn’d.

“*You* were,” he responded tersely. “Well, bye-bye old thing, I’ll get. I say, why not run up to town with me? Come down together first thing?”

Winsford shook his head.

“And leave them to raid for the bonds in peace. Not on your life! Don’t you worry about me. They haven’t had much for their visits so far.”

“That’s more than you can say. I’ll buzz out the window, needn’t trouble Benson. Down first thing in the morning.”

Winsford strolled up to the window with the departing guest. With scant ceremony the Captain pushed him back.

“Don’t you get in range of the garden to-night, Winnie me lad. Just possible they might have a sniper out. If what your uncle said was right, murder is only a trifle to these parties.”

Winsford laid a hand on his arm.

“I’m fairly positive my uncle *was* right, Bart,” he said seriously. “I’m beginning to think that the coping-stone that killed him wasn’t in the nature of an *accident* at all. In plain words, I think we’re up against an ugly gang—a damn’d strong combination.”

CHAPTER XIII

SANCTUARY

FOR quite a while Winsford, despite his friend's cheerful admonition in the matter of snipers, stood by the window opening to the garden. At first, listening in amusement to the hum of Captain Barty's new, and optimistic, acquirement which, by the rapidity with which all sound of it died away, suggested to him that it was being driven towards London at an utterly illegal speed.

From the window he strolled out into the huge garden itself. It was curiously silent—not even from the trees of the surrounding park-lands came the rustle of a leaf; the night was warm with not a breath of air stirring. Yet there was nothing about it, he thought, of pleasant calm; but a dull stagnation that made for considerable depression. He glanced aloft, half expecting to see heavy thunder-clouds gathering, but the sky was perfectly clear and showed no sign of changing.

At length he returned to the morning-room and, leaving the window open, found the armchair which showed least signs of the violent usage to which the furniture of that room had been subjected. Certainly it was not in particularly good shape; the back was ripped open and its padding completely exposed to human vision, whilst all that remained of the seat was odds and ends of tapes-

try and a few dejected-looking springs which bobbed about in each and every direction, when he endeavored to restore them to something like usable positions.

At length, by means of smothering them under all the available cushions he could find, he jammed himself in on top of them and stretched out to do some right down to bedrock thinking. It was significant of the trend of his mind in these past two days that, almost instantly, he found his thoughts revolving upon that beautiful stranger who had invaded them. Though he tried hard to bring himself down to the more concrete matters of finance and these missing bonds, she still remained dominant; indeed, to the speedy exclusion of all things else.

It was with that unpleasant feeling of having inadvertently been betrayed by sheer weariness into most unpropitious sleep, that he opened his eyes with a start. It had been sleep, moreover, in which a strange jumble of dreams had assailed him; dreams in which most of the characters of the dream—or was it farce?—of his strange uncle's will had brought in contact with him.

This foreign Doctor Chan-fu, Benson, Herrington with his little bag and express-delivery manner, old Barty, and Ho-fang were all mixed up in an inextricable mess. Once the greasy looking *Señhor Peroda* from Annam had impinged his unwholesome presence into the kaleidoscopic vista of filmy happenings—to be stabbed fatally by Mr. Herrington and the corpse removed in Barty's new, and unpaid for car.

Several women he had known at different times of his life crept, in some strange and inexplicable manner, into the ethereal mixture; but one alone, as in his waking moments, stood out apart from all others. About her, strange people sprang into existence, yellow men and white, all

enacting a part in some hazy and bloody tragedy. Of what the sequence of the happenings might be, what the significance of it all, he had never, even asleep, been able to form the remotest opinion. Waking, and searching back into it, the whole dream just seemed like some disturbing, particularly terrifying nightmare. Only one thing remained insistent in his memory: that through it all, like some invisibly chanted chorus, there ran the eerie music of that song of Ho-fang's: never, not for one instant, did it cease.

He got up with a shiver, not of cold, but of over-taut nerves, went to the sideboard and poured himself a whisky and soda. From that position he watched a curious thing; a thing that fitted in with some hazily remembered portion of his dream, so that he wondered whether he were really awake or still sleeping.

The chair in which he had slept stood with its back to the hall-way, and that curtained entrance beneath the staircase which led to the domestic offices of the house. Over its high back, a man in it could not be seen from either. But, from where he stood at the sideboard, Winsford had clear view of the whole room. Moreover a person not expecting to find him in that position would never notice him as he entered the room.

Benson, stout, solid, and stolid Benson, came from the hall, in his hand his salver, upon it a letter. A most commonplace happening—nothing more so in the whole daily round. But about the butler at this moment there was a most unusual stealthiness of tread. As he approached the back of the chair in which, beyond question, he expected to find his master, his deep-set eyes were travelling very quickly over certain points of the room. About the

man's whole manner there was something altogether foreign to him; something strained—tense.

He picked up the letter from the salver and examined it; his eyes moving quickly, uncertainly, between it and the back of the chair. He seemed like a man who, for some reason or other, is in a state of shaken nerves and acute suspicions. Once he stood, his great head cocked to one side, listening. Winsford, watching him perplexedly, wondered what for—what was it that he expected to hear? So intent was his interest in the entirely un-normal actions of his servant, that he did not hear Ho-fang come down the stairs stand and watch Benson keenly a moment, then fade soundlessly from sight. Slowly, very slowly and undecidedly, Benson approached the chair. Winsford, still without moving, spoke quietly across the room.

“Yes, Benson?”

The man's start as he jerked around was sufficient to throw the letter from the salver. Hurriedly, confusedly, he stooped, picked it up and replaced it.

“A—a letter for you, sir,” he stammered.

Winsford took it. “Thanks,” he said calmly. He stood looking at it curiously, turning it over and over. The handwriting was completely unknown to him. At last he opened the envelope, drew forth the letter, opened it and was about to read, when out of the corner of his eye he discovered something. Benson, just behind him, and standing upon tip-toe, was eagerly endeavouring to read the epistle over his shoulder.

He turned and looked at him squarely—though his usually pleasant smile was still upon his face.

“If there's any answer or anything of that sort,” he

murmured almost apologetically, "you shall read it, Benson, and advise me what to say. Thanks—you can go."

Benson left the room—without undue delay. Winsford, watching him through the curtained opening, smiled; then stood thinking a moment. A second or two later he dismissed with a laugh what had evidently been in his mind.

"I expect I'm imagining a lot of things that don't exist," he said. "The poor devil's probably acting strangely because he's like myself—nervy as a cat from lack of sleep."

He turned again to his letter and examined the post-mark upon the envelope.

"London, West Central," he read, considerably puzzled. "Wonder who the deuce it's from?" He read on a few lines. The frown upon his forehead deepened. He turned the letter over and glanced at the signature.

"Now who the devil is 'A Friend who sympathizes'?" he asked himself. With an involuntary glance back in the direction Benson had departed, he crossed again to his chair and gave it his absorbed attention.

"From one who knew the late Richard Winsford well," he read, "and was fully acquainted with his intentions regarding the missing bonds which comprised the greater part of his fortune, and who is well aware of the difficult position of his heir. Should he fail to find them before midday to-morrow, begs him to try the secret hiding-place built by Richard Winsford into the fireplace of the morning-room."

He got up and stood confronting that massive and most impenetrable-looking mantelpiece. Facing it he continued

reading the informative letter of this unknown sympathizer.

"In the centre of the underboard of the mantel and in the front of it are three carved knobs; one right, one left, and one centre."

He scrutinized it carefully. "By gad," he exclaimed triumphantly, "they're right! There they are! One—two—three."

"If the Captain stands exactly in front of the centre knob and presses it firmly, he will find that which he seeks."

He folded the letter carefully and put it in his jacket pocket;—then got himself squarely in front of the centre of those three mysterious knobs.

"I'm—I'm as nervous of this conjuring trick as the deuce," he muttered unsteadily, and then he remembered that, although he had poured it out, he had not as yet had his drink. He went back to the sideboard, took it up and finished it in one gulp. "That's better."

Returning, he took up his stand in the front of the mantel, fixing his position with the utmost care. He stretched out his right hand and pressed upon that centre protuberance.

"Press firmly, my unknown benefactor says. '*Right.*'"

A voice screamed suddenly in to the room at him.

"*Stop!*"

Winsford, dumb with amazement, and his hand still against the knob, whipped his head towards the direction from which the cry came. There in the window stood the girl who had occupied so much of his thoughts! And this time also, though the face was white and set and strained, the dull, vacant look was gone from her eyes; this time

they were bright and clear. At the instant he caught them enormously large, and clouded with horror.

"Stop!" she cried again, her voice shrill with terror.

"Eh?" He stared at her dully—not comprehending.

"Down!" she almost shrieked, "on the floor! Quick, quick!"

A small panel in the centre of the mantel immediately before him slid back with a loud, hard click. One last despairing cry she sent at him.

"Quick! Quick!"

Though comprehending nothing of her meaning, he threw himself full length upon the floor. Simultaneously, so close to his movement that it was impossible to tell which came first, two shots rang out; two splashes of red flame spurted from that panel. A large bowl of flowers upon the other side of the room smashed into a thousand pieces. Raising his head, Winsford stared horror-stricken at the mantel, then his eyes sought those of the girl. She was standing just inside the window, her flower-like face livid, her fingers twined together in an agony of apprehension.

"Thanks," he said quietly. "You just seem to have got here in time. You don't happen to know if they have any other batteries to let go, do you?"

But, in an ecstasy of relief, she kept repeating his words, not heeding the question he asked her.

"In time!" she whispered gratefully. "I was only just in time! Thank God!"

"Amen to that," he said, and then added softly: "And you? Do you happen to know if it's safe to rise?"

"I—I don't know," she said fearfully.

"In which case we'll have to chance it." Creeping out

of the line of fire, he got to his feet and worked carefully to the side of the open panel.

"Oh, be careful," she begged frightenedly. "His power is terrible—and supernatural."

He did not answer her, but suddenly whipping his hand into the panel, he gave a quick tug and drew forth a heavy calibre revolver. To the trigger of it was attached a long piece of thin wire.

With a grim smile he showed it to her.

"A balanced gun and a wired trigger," he said. "Nothing very supernatural about that. Unless it was left for the devil to work at the psychological moment. But I think this will prove to be a human one on two legs." He unfastened the wire from the revolver and dropped the weapon in his coat pocket: then, after a good look into it, closed the panel again. It snapped to with another loud click.

"H'm," he said, "very ingenious indeed."

Reassuringly he went up to the girl who was watching his every movement with wide, wondering eyes which still showed the strain and anxiety of the past few minutes.

"It's quite safe now," he told her, and earnestly went on. "My dear young lady, I have to tender you my most sincere thanks. Had it not been for you, the few brains I possess would have been slopping around on the carpet by now. Won't you—er—sit down?"

The girl looked about her fearfully, the old haunted look came back into her large, brown eyes.

"I—I dare not stay," she replied hastily. "But I had to come to warn you."

But Winsford had contrived to slip a hand behind her arm and gently, very, very gently, propelled her forward.

"Jolly good of you," he said seriously. "Er—the last time you were here . . ."

"The last time that I was here, I was sent under his influence," she said with a tremor. "To-night, I came of my own will."

"Now that you are here, won't you stay just a little?" he pleaded. "I've been thinking about you a—a tremendous lot in these two days, wondering when I should see you again."

"You have wanted to see me?" she asked him, simply, wonderingly.

"I have indeed," he assured her. "Please stay—if only for a little while."

She hesitated; again her eyes travelled around nervously.

"I am not thinking of myself, but of your danger."

"I wouldn't worry about that," he advised, smiling and leading her towards that ravaged armchair. "The Devil," he laughed, "looks after his own."

Strange words from him to her, though neither was aware of the significance of them. The same that Richard Winsford had spoken to his ill-fated partner, Legarde, that day upon the Son-ka river—the day they had left a little girl watching after them from the rotting jetty above Hanoi.

"Won't you tell me your name?" he begged.

She shook her head; a sad little gesture.

"I can't, because I do not know it," she told him slowly. They always call me, T'mala; but as that is a Malayan or Chinese name, it can't be my own, can it?" She turned to him to find him staring at her blankly.

"It is true," she said, with her wan little smile, "I do not know my own name."

Abruptly he changed the subject.

"Why did you come here—to-night, I mean?"

"I overheard the plot to kill you. I—I could do nothing else. They are seeking some—some bonds."

He drew back from her a little. His frank eyes searched her face.

"So that is it, is it? H'm. And you too know about the bonds?" He paused a moment thinking. "Who are these people," he demanded abruptly, "and what are they to you, that you should go in such terror of them?"

A long and deeply sorrow-laden sigh came from her lips.

"I have reason to," she said. "I have been in their power for years. I cannot even remember how long. I am guarded except when I am sent out under his control—to do his will." She passed a hand wearily over her forehead as though to move some cloud that lingered in her brain. "Sometimes," she went on, "I seem to get just a gleam of some other, happier life, of people who were kind, who loved me; but it goes quickly and I am left with only great blank spaces my memory cannot fill. He holds it chained, and will not let me remember."

"And you've had no one to appeal to in all these years," he pursued.

She shook her head slowly: "No one."

"And made no effort to escape from them?"

She made a pitiful little gesture.

"What would be the use? He would will me back, and I must obey him. Besides, where have I to go? They know

that, and their guard has not been so strict. That is how I was able to slip away to-night to warn you."

Thoughtfully he studied her face, the ivory-white skin, the great, sad eyes out of which looked the soul of a stricken, suffering child. There was something about her, pure and defenceless; something that appealed to him in every fibre of his body. Watching her, he ground his teeth together with something very much akin to red rage.

"Are there many of them?" he asked.

"Twelve—that I know of," she answered.

"They seem to want those bonds pretty badly," he observed.

She inclined her face towards him, speaking in almost a whisper that she might not be overheard by some unseen listener.

"They are but a secondary consideration in *his* sight," she told him in a long, hurried whisper. "There is something he wishes to regain, far, far before the money." She stopped nervously, then added in a whisper. "The Red Star of Yun-nan. Life means nothing to him to regain that—so . . . be warned and be careful." She got up and turned anxiously towards the window. "I must go back now."

Swiftly he intercepted her. There was a remarkably grim and determined look upon Winsford's face at this moment.

"Oh no, you, mustn't my dear Miss T'mala. We are not going to be so foolish as to permit them to get hold of you again." His eyes narrowed in tense thought.

Tears came suddenly into the limpid, dark eyes, she

turned to him with almost a passionate gesture of entreaty.

"You *do* believe what I've told you?" she questioned.

He glanced at her in amazement.

"Why, of course," he said. "What a foolish question. I was just thinking. Look here—I've an aunt in town, a dear soul, that I'm going to take you to right away."

"But—but that is impossible!" she breathed. "You cannot leave here. In your absence they would come and—and ruin you."

He gave a short, hard laugh.

"I shall have to take my chance of that. The main thing at the moment is *you*. Look here." He took her by the shoulders and looked squarely into the soft, timid, brown eyes. "If they had known you had it in mind to come here and warn me to-night, what would they have done?"

Honestly her eyes faced his.

"Killed me," she said simply; then added one word that chilled him: "Horribly."

"You knew that—yet you came. Exactly. I think we can cry quits. We'll start at once."

"Suppose they come after us?"

A second time he gave that hard, unmirthful laugh.

"I've a few pals in town," he answered grimly, "who will give them a very sticky time."

She laid a hand upon his arm, speaking with fervid intensity.

"They will fight and fight by every means in their power to prevent my being taken out of their control. I know too much—have seen too many of the terrible things done there."

"You have seen terrible things—where?" he asked slowly, his eyes never leaving her face.

"At the Red House," she answered in a whisper.

"The Red House," he echoed in the same tone. . . . Then . . ."

A sudden, a sharp, authoritative ring at the bell stopped him. The girl T'mala's hand went quickly to her mouth in sudden terror.

"They must not see me!" she begged him. "It is *he*! I can *feel* his presence!"

Quickly Winsford moved with her to the bottom of the staircase.

"Don't be alarmed. Nothing to be afraid of, I assure you. Go upstairs and wait. The second room on the right."

"I—I am afraid," she said shivering.

"Please go up," he urged. "I give you my word that if there's any funny business tried here, they'll get more than they bargained for."

"You—you will be careful," she warned quietly as she ascended.

"That'll be all right."

A second, sharp, angry ring came from the bell.

"Ah!" she said with a frightened start.

And "Ah!" echoed Mr. Winsford as he drew the stair curtains after her.

But there was a very different note in his exclamation—it promised considerable unpleasantness for somebody.

CHAPTER XIV

PERODA DOES HIS TRICK

TO George Winsford, standing thinking rapidly over the position as the girl slipped up the stairs, it came as a tremendous surprise to feel how cool he was. Where, but a few minutes before, he had been inwardly blazing, he now felt nothing but a calm, almost cold feeling of disgust and utter contempt for all concerned in this unfortunate girl's miseries.

In so far as their attentions to him were concerned personally, he could laugh. They probably would get something of a shock before they were through with that side of their nefarious schemes. He could have found it in his heart to wish that the gallivanting Barty had been present, not that he needed or foresaw any necessity for help for himself, but he might have kept a tight eye upon the girl during the conference which was about to take place.

However, Barty, at the speed he had set off, was very near to Town by now—unless he might be adorning the inside of some police station *en route* for maiming a few innocent pedestrians with his six-cylindere*d* *Juggernaut*. He was not here—and that was all that mattered. He, Winsford, must bring this business to a successful conclusion by himself.

His first thought was: was Benson aware that the girl

had visited the house? Not that it particularly mattered: Benson was sound—for all his curious antics over that letter. The ordinary, insatiable curiosity of the servant, that. In any case he couldn't see quite how Benson *could* know. That he had not appeared with the row of those two revolver shots proved that; for a few minutes at any rate, he must have been at least out of the house.

Quietly he went across to the maltreated settee and flung himself down upon it. Settee, he told himself, looked more like an undisturbed evening. He had scarcely got himself adjusted when Benson appeared, singularly enough from the hall. Perfectly still, Winsford watched his eyes sweep quickly to the floor, then to the mantel, and most curiously, straight from there to the shattered flower bowl. Now, what the deuce did that portend? Wary walking, this; wary walking indeed.

Then Benson's eyes fell upon the recumbent form watching him idly from the settee. For one fraction of an instant the big, disfigured face showed utter mystification, then settled into its usual stolidity.

"Doctor Chan-fu and a friend to see you, sir," he announced dully.

His master with perhaps the tiniest suspicion of surprise in his voice requested him to show the gentlemen in. Instantly Benson departed; the alacrity with which he went suggesting he was glad to be out of Winsford's sight.

"Now what the deuce did he expect to find here?" mused that gentleman. "Certainly not me having a quiet *siesta* on the settee."

When, a moment later, Benson entered the room, he was followed by Doctor Chan-fu, behind whom came, slunk would perhaps be the better expression, the *Señhor*

Leon Peroda. Last of all the giant mute, Hwang, who moved at once towards, and took up a position before the long window.

Out of the tail of his eye Winsford kept sight of him.

"There's one thing," he told himself, "if you start anything, my big friend, a bullet in the right place will stop you as quickly as it would a Tom Thumb." One thing struck him instantly: with the coming of Chan-fu a cold breath had swept over the room—that chill *aura* of malignance which always seemed to fill the strange house was stronger in it than ever. But he permitted nothing of this to show in his cheerful face. His greeting of the callers was irreproachable—save that he did his welcoming with nods, and kept his hands sedulously in his pockets.

"I am sorry to trouble you at this hour," Chan-fu began in softly modulated tones.

Winsford waved the excuse away with an airy gesture.

"Not at all, Doctor—any time, any time!" For the first time, and with splendidly assimilated surprise, he took notice of Peroda. "Why, bless me if, it isn't the *Señhor* Peroda from Annam. How are you, *Señhor*? So you two know each other, eh?" he questioned pointedly.

With perfect calmness Chan-fu answered him.

"Oh yes. The *Señhor* told me you had already met."

"*Rather!* Sit down, *Señhor*. Grab some pews. Why, yes," he went on, "The *Señhor* called just after you last time. But he didn't mention knowing you, Doctor."

"He came on to me from here, and presented several letters of introduction," was Chan-fu's quite detached reply.

"Then you didn't know each other before?"

Chan-fu gave his questioner a quick flash from the inscrutable eyes. "No," he answered quietly.

"Then that explains his hurry, perhaps," Winsford went on glibly. "The *Señhor* was telling us—very modestly, mark you—a few of his characteristics, when he must have suddenly remembered his letters of introduction to you. Absolutely *flew* through the window to deliver them."

The *Señhor* Peroda, looking decidedly uncomfortable, intervened.

"The *Señhor* would not per'aps understan' even eef I explained," he murmured in his oiliest voice.

There was a bite in Winsford's careless answer.

"Perhaps not—that kind of fear takes a bit of explaining."

The *Señhor*'s protruding eyes seemed to draw inwards slightly.

"Fear?" he echoed. "I, Leon Peroda, am a race-motorist, Captain. The race-Motorist, 'e does not know fear. *Por Dios, noo!*"

"Ah, so you *do* drive a car, *Señhor*," Winsford drawled slowly. "Thought I saw you out in one yesterday."

After which a rather awkward pause ensued. Winsford, cat-eyed for these two guests of his, noted that the fearless Peroda had gone suddenly nervous. Saw also that the sphinx-faced Doctor gave him a quick, warning glance.

"Well, Doctor, what can I do for you? I'm all on my own." Again he intercepted the quick glance between the two. "Barty came down this evening, but had to run back to town to a supper party. Come about those scientific papers?"

Chan-fu shook his head negatively.

"It was with that in mind that I started to call upon you to-night," he answered smoothly. "But more urgent business compels me to let that object wait."

"Nothing serious, I hope?" Winsford enquired politely.

The long, oblique eyes looked him squarely in the face.

"Very serious," Chan-fu said quietly and went on, every word marked with exact and distinct emphasis. "I have called to ask you to hand over a patient of mine who has escaped from my care and whom I have reason to believe is here."

The most complete surprise imaginable dawned upon Captain Winsford's face.

"A what?" he inquired, in that same note of politeness.

"A patient," Chan-fu repeated meticulously.

Then came the second awkward pause of this interview.

"And—er—who is this young lady who has escaped from your house?" he asked with tremendous interest.

Chan-fu gave him a cold smile.

"And—who, if I may ask, mentioned that it was a young lady?"

"Damn fool!" hissed Winsford to himself inwardly, then what appeared to be a perfectly brilliant way out of the *impasse* struck him.

"Er"—he beamed pleasantly upon his questioner—"Ho-fang." He noticed the fearless gentleman from Annam start and give a quick, nervous look about the corner of the room. But not one muscle of the Chinaman's face flickered.

"Ho-fang?" he repeated evenly. "So! I am honoured at the interest you would seem to have been taking in my humble abode. Why not come and see it yourself? There are many things there that I should be glad to show you—things of interest."

It struck Winsford that never in his life had he ever heard a note of such diabolical cruelty lurk behind the tones of a human voice; but he merely smiled carelessly.

"Thanks—awfully kind—will some day," he murmured.

"And where ees Ho-fang now?" The nervousness in Peroda's voice was very marked. Winsford grinned at him openly.

"Out," he informed him with a snap. "Er—this is his day off. So you'll be all right." He turned to Chan-fu. "About this patient of yours, Doctor—you were saying?"

Chan-fu moved a step in his direction.

"It is rather a sad story, Captain Winsford," he said, quite dispassionately. "For many years the poor girl we seek has been mentally deficient and under my medical care. Legally," he added significantly, "she is also my ward."

"You mean that she is insane?" Winsford put briskly.

"Yes. It is all very sad."

"Appalling," Winsford agreed quietly.

"Not of course, dangerously. She suffers from extraordinary hallucinations. Sufficiently so, to necessitate her being kept under control."

"Poor dear," observed Captain Winsford placidly. "And what are her particular hallucinations?"

Very precisely and deliberately Chan-fu gave him the information.

"The idea obsesses her," he said, "that those who are her best friends are her deadliest enemies. That they intend violence to her—and others!"

"Not really!" Winsford's astonishment was intense.

"True, I assure you. Her poor mind conjures up vivid pictures of crime, directed against certain persons. People, in most cases, entirely unknown to her."

Winsford stared open-mouthed at the speaker.

"This is frightfully interesting," he said with quite a gasp. "What sort of crime?"

In particularly deliberate words the answer was given him: not a doubt but that Chan-fu was picking his words carefully.

"For instance. She imagines that under hypnotic influence she is sent out to execute commissions which are wholly unlawful. Also that she is infamously treated, cruelly beaten. She overhears plots in which someone is to be killed by an imaginary gang. Imagination; purely imagination."

"Dear me!" responded Winsford—and nothing more.

"These delusions," Chan-fu proceeded in the same balanced tone, "these entirely imaginary delusions impress her diseased brain to such an extent that she tells them as truth. Tells them so vividly that she can persuade other people that they *are* true."

"I say," Winsford ejaculated, "bit awkward for you, isn't it?"

Chan-fu smiled: "I think not—when I have explained."

"But supposing," the other persisted obstinately, "supposing people don't choose to believe your explanation?"

"My word as a medical man," Chan-fu began, but Winsford, with a gesture, cut him short.

"But suppose they say—'Damn your word as a medical man'—and took the girl to Scotland Yard to tell *them* her funny stories?"

The face of the Chinaman became a mask.

"Against whom?" he inquired.

"You, of course. And further suppose that Scotland Yard took proceedings against you?"

"Upon whose evidence? That of a girl whom I, as a medical man, certify to be insane?"

"But, my dear friend, my very dear Doctor, *you'd* be in the *dock*," Winsford pointed out specifically. "Probably also your friend, the *Señhor* there. It would be for the Crown medical officers to certify her insanity—not you."

Again Chan-fu smiled that long, enigmatical smile of his.

"You have a very fertile imagination, Captain Winsford," he remarked suavely.

"Not so dusty. How long," he pressed, a curious note in his voice, "has she been under your control?"

Chan-fu gave one slow sidelong look towards him before he answered.

"Control?"

"I daresay you'd prefer me to say 'care'! Under your care, then? How long?"

"For some years—since she was a child."

"She's had a pretty rotten time, then," declared Winsford, point blank.

The fine, slanting eyebrows lifted a moment amusedly.

"Beyond necessary—restraint, I think not."

Winsford laughed openly: an ugly sound.

"Restraint—that's good. What's her name?" he demanded flatly.

For a moment the Doctor did not reply, then:

"You are asking a great many questions, Captain," he remarked meaningly.

Winsford shrugged his shoulders.

"I'd like to know the name of the lady I'm supposed to have hidden here?" he retorted.

"We know she ees 'ere!" spat the *Señhor* Peroda advancing. Winsford turned quickly upon him and he dropped back again.

Chan-fu intervened: "Captain, he speaks the truth. We *know* that she is here. Believe me . . ."

"That is just what I don't," said the man addressed, his jaw set, an ugly expression creeping over his face. "I don't believe one damn word you've uttered. Not one syllable," he went on, "and if she *were* here, I'd see you in hell before I'd give her up to you."

At which frank utterance, the Senhor Peroda's hand stole quietly towards the breast pocket of his coat; but a warning glance from Chan-fu stopped any further, and open, manifestation of his acute displeasure.

"Captain Winsford," he said quietly, "you do not realize the danger you run in meddling with my affairs."

"I'll chance that," was the cold reply.

"You believe the lady to be sane but persecuted, and would go to any lengths to prevent her returning to my care?"

"Absolutely."

Chan-fu studied him attentively.

"It is within your power," he continued slowly, "to do this without danger to the lady in question." The almond eyes settled curiously upon the man facing him. "You would be willing to undertake the responsibility of her?"

"Like a shot!" The answer came like the crack of a whip.

"I will give you a document," proceeded Chan-fu, "that will transfer her from my care to yours—upon one condition."

"Well?"

"That you hand to me intact the bonds left by your late uncle. And, before everything, return to me the star of rubies he stole from the great Temple of Yun-nan. Your answer, Captain Winsford?"

But that was to come from a totally unexpected source; one that made Winsford start, and brought the Chinaman's inscrutable smile to his thin lips again.

"Captain Winsford," it cried sharply, "do not do it!" The girl came quickly down and into the room.

It was Chan-fu who broke the paralyzed silence.

"Ah, there you are, my dear T'mala," he commenced suavely. "Captain Winsford was just assuring us that you were not here." He moved slowly towards her: in his black eyes a hard, metallic gleam. "My poor girl, you are tired."

Winsford stepped between them.

"One moment," he said hastily. "If I agree to your—"

"Don't trust him," she broke in beseechingly. "Don't let them take me back," she implored, her great eyes fixed upon his in desperate appeal. "You don't know what I've suffered through him!"

Chan-fu smiled pityingly.

"You see, Captain, her brain . . . purely imagination."

With the courage of desperation the unhappy girl flashed around upon him.

"My brain!" she cried in an agony. "My brain is not yet what you are trying to make of it—what you will make of it if I am forced to go back with you. Imagination! Was it imagination that caused me to come here to warn Captain Winsford of the ghastly trap you set for him in that fireplace?"

"Aha!" interjected Winsford. "So that was your little stunt, was it, Doctor?"

"Was it imagination," she flamed on, "when I heard you discussing the sending of that letter? Was that im-

agination?" She pointed wildly at the shattered bowl. "Was that broken by my imagination?"

To which rapidly-hurled accusation, even the lightning-witted Chan-fu could, for the moment, think of no satisfying reply. His sombre eyes, red now with a light that boded no good to the accuser when once again inside the walls of The Red House, turned slowly upon Winsford. He found that young man regarding him with a fixity of expression not only extremely unpleasant, but difficult to meet.

"I think," he began . . .

With a contemptuous gesture Winsford silenced him.

"Damn what you think," he said icily, then surveyed the other from head to foot. "So you're the man my uncle warned me about in that letter."

Chan-fu drew himself up and, equally contemptuous, bowed to him.

"All right. The lady," he said stonily, "*stays here.*"

"I think—not," said Chan-fu in the same tense, hard voice.

Winsford flared up. His under-jaw shot out truculently.

"By God, she does! And for as long as she chooses."

"There are three of us," Chan-fu reminded him, still in that same level voice.

"That's all right. I'm good enough for a couple of you . . ."

There was a swift, cat-like movement from Chan-fu; Peroda and the great mute instantly shifted their positions to close in upon him. Winsford dropped his hand into his coat pocket; when he withdrew it the revolver glittered in his palm. "*And this gentleman will help. The one you had set for me in that fireplace. Came in handy—for the*

other side. Now," he snapped, "order that servant of yours outside the window!"

Chan-fu, never moving his eyes from the determined-looking man menacing him with the revolver obeyed. The giant Hwang, signalled to, passed out into the garden from sight.

"Now you," Winsford ordered. "And take your greasy-looking friend with you."

Slowly, very slowly both men back away towards the window. Stoic and fatalist as was the Chinaman, he was not prepared to join his forefathers leaving his revenge unaccomplished—his oath unfulfilled. The Señhor needed no other prompting to get out of that place than the look in the Englishman's eyes.

"*Nombre di Dios!*" he cursed behind his teeth, "Why would he not turn his back just for one instant? Just one little instant—that would be enough for Leon Peroda!" But the Englishman did not turn his back; close up to them, his deadly weapon trained fully on the chest of Chan-fu, he moved them inexorably towards that window.

"And-don't-come-back!" he warned chillingly. "Next time . . ."

But he got no further. Whatever there had been of strangeness and mystery about this inexplicable house, by far its most terrible secret was now to be revealed to him. As he stood by the window ushering his undesirable guests out of his house, his unemployed hand upon the arm of the girl whose protection he had taken upon himself, that panel door into which Ho-fang had dragged the body of the man he had strangled, opened suddenly; from it the grisly carcase of the unfortunate Mateo dropped prone, with the thud of a sand-bag. In his hand were still clenched the papers he had paid with his life to obtain. Instantly the

door closed with a loud click. The fall of the body and the click of the lock came as one sound. No sign or trace was there to be seen of where the murdered man had dropped from.

Winsford, with a staggered cry stared, at the body aghast, then moved quickly to it, stooped and examined it. Into the girl's hand he put the revolver, conscious of nothing else but this ghastly discovery. She, peering forward at the dreadfully, swollen and blackened face, seemed hardly to know what he was doing.

Back through the window Chan-fu stepped quickly. Beside him crept Peroda, a wicked twist at his mouth as he saw the chance he had waited for. Again his hand stole to his pocket, but again Chanfu stopped him—this time with an evil smile.

"Not that," he said in a peremptory whisper. "We have him in a way far better suited to this country. Wait!"

Winsford, sweat upon his forehead and his face almost blank with horror, looked up wildly.

"Good God," he exclaimed, "the poor devil has been strangled!"

Chan-fu looking down upon him, smiled ominously.

"Rather embarrassing evidence to have secreted in your house, Captain," he observed softly.

Winsford stared at him helplessly. "Where did he come from—now, I mean?"

"That," said Chan-fu, "will be for you to explain—to the police."

"I never saw the man before in my life!"

Chan-fu knelt and examined the body.

"You will have some difficulty in persuading them to believe *that*, I fancy."

Winsford stared at him in dumb incomprehension.

"Are you accusing *me* of murdering him?" he got out at last.

"My dear sir, an unknown man is found dead in your house—strangled. What would you say if the case were not your own?"

Leisurely he moved to the telephone, lifted the receiver and placed it to his ear. The girl T'mala stared at him; stood watching him in horrible fascination. She did not see Peroda come stealthily beside her; did not even feel him when he quietly took the weapon Winsford had given her out of her hand. She stood there, a thing transfixed, petrified by the sudden terrible turn events had taken. Her face was grey with sickening anxiety. For in the moment of his triumph the cup had slipped from the lips of her brave defender and he was caught in some undreamed of trap. It was Chan-fu's hour—knowing the pitilessness of the yellow man, she shuddered right through her very being.

"What—what are you going to do?" Winsford demanded.

"Call for the police," was the uncompromising answer.

Winsford stood and stared at him like a man stunned.

A sudden hoarse and horrible cry came from Peroda. He, with nothing but coarse curiosity, had stooped and examined the features of the strangled man.

"Mateo!" he screamed almost hysterically. "Mateo! He will be avenged."

With a growl Chan-fu clapped his hand over the mouth-piece of the telephone, his face for once distorted with rage.

"Fool!" he snarled deep in his throat. "Fool!"

Quick as thought the girl darted and looked into the dead man's face.

"It is Mateo," she cried. "I remember him now! I have often seen him at The Red House." She pointed at Chan-fu accusingly "He is one of his men."

"Ah," uttered Winsford, and a sigh of deep thankfulness broke from his lips. For a few minutes it had been a ticklish situation—with a man like Chan-fu holding the whip.

"One of your men, eh? That puts a different complexion upon things."

Chan-fu did not speak; slowly he hung the receiver back upon the hook and put the 'phone down.

Winsford looked at him curiously. No enemy to fool with this, he was thinking. For quickness of brain, for resource in action, this Chinaman wanted some beating.

"Well?" he said coldly, significantly. "Not so keen on the police now that we know who the man is?" But Chan-fu did not answer.

A sudden cry came from the girl. She pointed at the papers clutched in the dead man's hand.

"See, Captain Winsford! Those papers!"

"The bonds, I'll bet a million!" he gasped and moved forward to find himself staring into the muzzle of the revolver Peroda now held.

"If you don't want to be shot, Captain," came in stern tones from Chan-fu, "you will stand perfectly still."

He knelt and with difficulty worked the papers from the dead man's clutch. A triumphant cry came from his lips. "Yes! Mateo had succeeded!"

Winsford made a sudden, quick move upon him; but Peroda stepped between them, his revolver trained squarely between Winsford's eyes. Chan-fu placed the packet to the other side of him.

"Stand still, Captain," he advised for the second time.

"Nothing would please Peroda better than to kill you outright. Accidents like that have happened—with him—before. Keep him over there," he ordered. Peroda, those fishy eyes of his fixed in burning hate upon his man, backed him away.

Chan-fu tore almost feverishly at the dead man's clothes.

"My star," he muttered, "I must see if he has The Red Star!"

"I should," Winsford advised, "it might incriminate you." It was plain to him that things at the moment were hopeless. A chance might come up later to turn the tables, but as things stood there was nothing to be done. In plain contempt he turned his back upon Peroda and lit a cigarette.

Slowly, unseen, and perfectly soundless, the door in the mantel swung open again. From its recess, Ho-fang surveyed the scene. Then stooping quickly picked up the packet which the feverishly searching Chan-fu had placed by his side, drew back again, and the secret door closed again as noiselessly as it had opened.

Chan-fu looked up from his work with set, frowning face.

"Nothing," he muttered, "nothing!" He placed his hand beside him to pick up that which he had himself placed there but a moment before. It was gone. He started to his feet.

"Has he moved?" he demanded pointing at Winsford. Peroda shook his head.

"No—nor I."

Chan-fu, in an awful voice, made a cold, succinct statement.

"I placed the bonds on the floor here a moment ago.

Now they are gone! Which one of you has taken them?" He pointed at the girl who cowered from him in terror. "You!"

Peroda turned.

"But," he began, "How can eet be . . ."

A hand closed quickly on his revolver, an iron fist landed under his jaw, sending him reeling across the floor.

"Quickly!" Winsford cried at the girl. "Out into the garden! I'll follow."

With one affrighted glance at the face of Chan-fu she obeyed, running at top speed. Keeping the two held until she had a chance, Winsford suddenly turned and followed her. It was his undoing.

Peroda steadied himself. A knife flashed into his hand, then flew straight as an arrow at the retreating back. With a groan Winsford stopped, staggered back into the room. A scream came from the garden—the girl T'mala was in the hands of the great brute, Hwang! Again he turned, trying to fight a way towards her, spun around, and went down with a moan. He lay upon his face, perfectly still.

From the hall door Benson came into the room. He stood and looked down at the body—then rolled it over with his foot. A broad grin broke upon his face.

"So you got him after all, Doctor," he said.

CHAPTER XV

THE SONG OF THE RIVER-MEN

WHEN Winsford re-opened his eyes it was to find himself in a thick, murky gloom scarcely pierced by two tiny red points of light which seemed to be at some little distance from him. He was, so far as he could tell, alone. He closed his eyes again and lay still.

There was a reek of something in the place that, at first, he could not make out—it dawned upon him slowly that it was brandy. But above that was another strange, insistent, and pungent smell—he could give it no name.

He appeared to be upon a bed; comfortable enough but low-set; almost upon the floor. Gingerly he put out his right arm and felt about him. At a few inches behind his head, the hand touched a wall—an unusual contact which made him think hard. The wall was of unplastered stone and *circular*.

An effort to see what the left hand could reveal brought a quickly stifled groan from him; then he discovered that his upper arm upon that side was strapped close to his body and, again, that the forearm was in a sling.

The whole business came rushing back upon him. The girl, that wicked, malevolent creature, Chan-fu, the dirty, greasy Peroda who had, in some strange way, stabbed him

from fifteen feet distance. He had a dim, faint recollection of facing the two scoundrels, then—a slide down a deep, black pit into nothing.

Singularly, as he lay, he felt perfectly well; with the exception of this quick, smarting pain about his left shoulder. One thing he could not understand: Peroda had unquestionably stabbed him in the back. Whatever else was obscure, that much was certain. Why, then, was the pain he felt in the region of his shoulder and upper arm? That was a bit of a twister. But the first point to be unravelled was, where was he? And, most important of all, was he a hard and fast prisoner in the hands, say, of Chan-fu?

Again he opened his eyes and kept them steadily so. Get them used to the darkness and, bit by bit, he might decipher things a little. It seemed to him that those two red pin-points of light came appreciably nearer, not moved of themselves, but drew in as his eyes found a focus. From each one of them he could now perceive that a tiny spiral of smoke was arising and also from them was coming that pungent, aromatic scent.

Little by little things seemed to take hazy form out of the darkness. The room, cell, cellar, or whatever it was, was lofty and circular—as his fingers had first told him. There appeared to be no door to the place, or even a splurge of dark shadow which would suggest the existence of any such entrance; but he noticed that an iron Jacob's-ladder ran up the wall at one point, and then melted away into the blackness. The two red glows of light he now found were placed in front of a small, and pagoda-shaped box fastened to the circular wall. In it appeared to be some kind of a figure; a grotesque, indeed hideous figure, which even in that light he could make out to be Chinese. He compressed

his lips. Chinese things suggested Chan-fu, and that was not so good.

Again he stared at and about the figure, endeavouring to penetrate the mystery of his surroundings when a third red-amber light not much above the level of his low-set bed caught his eye. But this he felt certain was not fixed like the two smaller ones above. It trembled, pulsated into a more vivid glow, then died down again,—to repeat the movement with almost rhythmic regularity. Winsford, watching it intently, wondered what it could be, until one far more vivid glow than the others revealed to him that immediately behind it were two dark, watching eyes—human eyes he could have sworn.

He had company. Wherever he was, someone was keeping close watch and ward over him.

For a further few moments he lay still, but the tension of this sustained silence was beginning to get upon his nerves.

"Hullo," he said suddenly, when he could stand it no longer.

A calm and equable voice answered him; a voice which made him jump—and from more causes than surprise.

"How you feelum now?" inquired Ho-fang solicitously; got up, struck a match, and lit a piece of candle which stood upon the same ledge as the grotesque figure in the pagoda-shaped box. Winsford lay gaping at him open-mouthed.

"Where am I?" he asked blankly. "And how the devil did I get here?"

"You all-li," Ho-fang informed him. "You all-slame in cellar down plenny dleep. You uncle buil' him case'n plenny bad mans clomes sometime, he hide. *Hoki*. How you feelum now?" he repeated.

"AI. really," Winsford told him. "Except for a pain in this shoulder. I can't just understand it. Didn't Peroda stab me?"

"You all-slame plenny goddam lucky," Ho-fang informed him. "Peloda, him tlow knife stlaight, you go alonga you flathers, qlick. All slame he hit bone, knife slide alonga you shoulder. Plenny cut, mlutchee bleed, plenny you feel stliff, but no hurt. Ho-fang put Chinee oi'-ment, tie you up. T'moller you mluch plenny better. *Hoki*."

"But," Winsford stared about him in the flickering light of the candle, "how did I get down here? Unless I'm all to pieces they left me for dead in the morning-room?"

Ho-fang bobbed his pig-tailed head affirmatively.

"*Hoki*. I flin' you. I cally you ddown here."

Winsford stared at the diminutive Ho-fang incredulously.

"You carried me," he gasped. "Devil of a job, wasn't it?"

"Mluch plenny stlong feller, Ho-fang. Plenny little—plenny strong. You uncle, Mlisser Winsfor', him all slame lot bigger 'e you. Ho-fang cally 'im plenny times. When he dlunk," he added informatively.

"I see. You must be as tough as the Devil himself."

Ho-fang grinned from ear to ear at this appraisal.

"You uncle," he said delightedly. "He all-tlime slay Ho-fang lil' devil," he said. "You slay Ho-fang lil' devil—plenny good. *Hoki*!"

"What's about the time?" Winsford asked.

"Fi, slix clock, mornin' " he was told. "You stop still; I got you clothes; blingum ddown las' night. Mlutchee clut you others—mlutchee bleed. No good—no good!"

It was whilst getting into the things so thoughtfully provided by surely the most remarkable of all valets, that

his eyes fell again upon the small and hideous figure in the pagoda-shaped box.

"What is that, Ho-fang?" he asked. "I don't know much about such things, but is that your Joss?"

Instantly and without answer Ho-fang left him and made deep obeisance before the little idol; then, rising, he took two more sticks from a box, lit them, and set them by the side of the others.

"Him mluch pow'full Joss," he informed the staring Winsford. "Ho-fang he say 'im, you dlo this, you dlo slomet'ing else, I blurn you plenny joss stick. He say Ho-fang: 'All-li!' Mluchee goddam pow'ful Joss, him."

"He looks it."

"*Hoki*. I tellum heim, whaffor you no kill some'dy—him all-slame ellemny mine. I burn you plenny stlicks. He say: 'Ho-fang, all li.' Blimeby they all slame glo"—he gave a lifelike imitation of a person in the throes of appalling inward pains—"all-slame plenny belly-ache. They dlie. *Hoki*."

"Do they, begad. That's the kind of a joss to have, I should say."

Ho-fang nodded in complete agreement.

"Goddam clever feller Ho-fang Joss," he affirmed.

Winsford, dressed and seated upon the bed, came at the subject uppermost in his mind.

"You—you—didn't see what became of the young lady who was here last evening?" he asked, chilled with nerves as to what answer might be given him.

Ho-fang squatted and stared at the wall in silence.

"What does that mean, Ho-fang? That you don't know—or won't tell me?" he persisted.

The small Chinaman still sat silent.

Winsford got up, his face set and determined.

"All right," he said. "If there's something you know and won't tell me, I'll find out for myself."

"No glood you glo that house," said Ho-fang sharply. "Ho-fang know plenny mluch. Ho-fang hear scleam in garden—all slame see her tlaken way. Plenny bad Chan-fu he come here. Plenny wlorse you glo there."

Sweat broke upon Winsford's forehead: "They've taken her back," he said slowly. "That was last night! Good God, man, what couldn't have happened to her in that time! She could have been tortured—killed . . ."

But Ho-fang shook his head.

"No can do tlorture—no can do kill," he objected. "All ni' they here. All slearch. Ho-fang wlatch. Ho-fang blin alonga Led House," he volunteered suddenly.

"You've been! You mean in the night—last night?" Winsford's voice was shaky with undisguised anxiety.

Again Ho-fang bobbed a jerky affirmative.

"One, tloo hour go, she all-li. I slee her at win'ler . . ."

"At a window—yes!"

"*Hoki*. Ho-fang climb tlee, look in room. Peloda him mluch plenny talk, mluch plenny jabber her. Then he glo way, clome here 'gain. Ho-fang foller. She all-li then!"

Winsford, a load lifted from his mind, clapped upon Ho-fang's thin shoulder with his uninjured hand.

"Good man. By gad, you're one in a million, Ho-fang. Now show me how I get out of here, and I'll go across and have a few words with the swine. I rather fancy they'll be a bit surprised to see me roll up again."

But Ho-fang's attitude was one of great uneasiness; that he was not in favour of this programme was very palpable.

"You no glo Led House," he objected. "Plenny tlouble Led House." He pointed at the incapacitated arm. "Big tlouble clome—you no can do!"

"I'll have a dam'd good try," answered Winsford quietly. "So you quite understand, Ho-fang, *I'm going.*"

"All-li," responded Ho-fang philosophically. "You Bloss. You glo."

Stooping, he drew aside the low-set Chinese bed. Beneath it was a trap door which he opened up. Six feet below, Winsford saw the opening to an underground passage.

"Where does that lead to?" he asked.

"Bling you alonga glarden," he was told. "Ho-fang leave open case'n you clome back qlick. They chase you—*hoki*—shoot bolts. They no can glet in here."

"By Jove, but my uncle must have been pretty terrified of something, Ho-fang?" Winsford commented with a grim smile.

But there was no smile on Ho-fang's face as he answered.

"You uncle," he said solemnly, "he *know* Chan-fu. Him stlong man—hard man, but he frightened Chan-fu. Chan-fu all-slame *devil-man*; him keepum bad Joss—angly Joss. You no laugh at Chan-fu" he warned, "or you glo dead plenny qlick!"

"Thanks for the tip, Ho-fang. I *don't* laugh at him. Come to that, in my first clash with him I've dashed little to laugh at. But I'm either having that girl out of his clutches," he said indomitably, "or I'll go under having a try. That's all." He got down into the cavity that led to the passage. "Keep an eye out for me," he added, "in case I—I should say, we—come on the run."

"*Hoki!*" said Ho-fang impassively.

A sudden, swift flash of memory made Winsford pause and turn back a moment. There was a puzzled expression upon his face.

"There's one thing I wanted to ask you since last night, Ho," he said. "Did that young lady, Miss T'mala, ever come to this house in my uncle's day?"

Ho-fang shook his head.

"No savee M'lissie T'mala," he answered. "No clome here beflore."

"That's funny," Winsford mused, "dashed funny." He reflected upon whatever was in his mind for a moment, Ho-fang watching him steadily.

"That song you sometimes sing to yourself, Ho-fang, the Chinese one?" He grinned feebly. "Well, you only sing one—and a pretty horrible specimen it is—to our ears. You know the song I mean?"

"I know," Ho-fang said, "all the slame livermen song on *Thao Song Coi*."

"That's it, that's it," Winsford said eagerly. He recalled instantly that was the name the doctor gave it upon the afternoon of his first visit: recalled also that the educated Chinaman, Chan-fu, and the ex-coolie, Ho-fang, pronounced it in exactly the same way. "Now how could any young lady *not* Chinese, ever come to know that song, Ho?"

Ho-fang stared at him fixedly.

"No sabe," he said abruptly. "Ho-fang no sabe she know that slong? No can do—no can do!"

"But she does," Winsford insisted. "She can't place how, or where, or anything about it, but she *does*. She thinks it must be as a little child she heard it."

Strangely the little Chinaman's face went set.

"All slame lit' chil'," he repeated slowly.

"And in her mind it always associates with a great river, and the coming of many men in boats, singing it. Cruel men, she called them. And somewhere in it was a

great fire. It wouldn't have any meaning that—well, that you might make head or tail of, Ho-fang, would it? You see, her memory is quite gone—she doesn't know who she is—not even her real name."

He looked anxiously towards the little figure standing so very stiff and still above him. Studied closely the wrinkled, yellow face from which every trace of expression had suddenly vanished.

"Nothing there you could help in, Ho-fang, is there?"

The pig-tailed head with its expressionless mask of a face moved slowly from side to side. The negative was final—utterly so.

Winsford sighed.

"Sorry," he said, "I somehow hoped there might be. I'll be off."

Left alone, it was minutes before the yellow man moved, even by one muscle of his face. Then a great cry broke from his lips.

"Lit' Mlissie! Lit' Mlissie!" rang through the cavernous stone cellar. "I kleep my plomise, Bloss Winsfor'; Ho-fang not florget!"

Turning, he went to his Joss. From the little box he took, and solemnly lit, many joss-sticks, the smoke from them rose in a thick cloud. There before that idol which, to him, was God, Omnipotent and Awful, he prostrated himself upon the stones in all humility. Quite half an hour had passed before he arose.

CHAPTER XVI

THE RED HOUSE AT BARNES

IT was an important looking place, The Red House, built in the middle years of the last century by some opulent person who meant that, by his house at least should his riches be known.

Like that other one upon the Common, it was surrounded by a high wall that enclosed fairish grounds, but nothing like in size those of the place in which Richard Winsford had hidden himself.

Above the roof-tree, a glazed octagonal tower reared its head; from which, doubtless, the original owner would sit in state and view the surrounding country. Doubtless also, being as he was, a short-sighted man, with the comfortable feeling upon him that he, too, was a monarch of all he could survey.

Deep in that house was one room which did not owe its origin to his hopelessly commonplace mind: it had been built in when the house came into the hands of its present tenant, the great Oriental scientist, Doctor Chan-fu. But, unlike that enemy he had followed thousands of miles to come to grips with, white labour had no hand in the alterations the impressive looking Chinaman had made in his residence. A veritable army of his countrymen had suddenly appeared, started in upon their labours, and, concluded, as suddenly disappeared. What it was that they had done in that house, no man outside it, and few inside,

ever knew. One thing the two enemies had in common: both superintended every inch of the work until its completion.

It was a strange room that they built out of several: a room which reminded Benson, upon the first time that ever, in secret and at dead of night, he put foot in it, of that old house at Oxford. Or perhaps a combination of several of its features, for to the magnificence of those Chinese rooms with their wonderful hangings and tapestries, was added in this one particular instance that long, plain, cellar-like room into which Benson had once been warned never to set foot if he valued his life. And this room, like that other, was, at any rate in part, considerably below the level of the ground.

There was only one entrance to it that was apparent to a casual visitor—and they were not many in that room—but there were others so skilfully hidden that the keenest examination would never reveal them. Worthily indeed had the Chinese workmen executed the ideas of Chan-fu. High up in the walls were two small windows—the only means of admitting natural light and air it had.

At the back of the room a huge bookcase, a magnificent specimen of Chinese carving, held place of honour—but one. Opposite it, upon its base and in a marvellously inlaid cabinet, stood that terrible Joss of the Chan-fu which had been rifled in the sacred temple of Yun-nan; about its neck the chain of brilliants which had adorned it upon the night when the impious hands of the dead Winsford had dragged from it the priceless, the incomparable Red Star of Yun-nan. Before it stood a lacquer tray piled high with Chinese paper money: at each side burned the joss-sticks which, night and day, were never allowed to

die out. Near it was a brazier, through the bars of which showed a dull, sullen, red glow.

It was a magnificent room, rich and warm in its colour, barbaric in its Oriental splendour; yet always those who came into it left with an involuntary shiver—as one might upon stepping into the sunlight after passing out of some ancient but newly-discovered tomb of the dead of centuries ago.

And if the splendour of the room was barbaric, not less so was that of the man who owned it; for this room Chan-fu never entered unless dressed in the robes of his high estate—Chan-fu, hereditary *Tao-toi* of the Yunnan; Lord and Mandarin of the Yellow Button.

There was, it appeared, an elaborate set of signals to it; signals which warned Chan-fu not only of the approach of one of his satellites—but also the identity of which particular unit it was of that unholy band who sought him—inanimate testimony to the subtle fertility of invention of his painstaking race. Over the one door were a series of coloured electric globes, the sudden lighting up of each one or a combination of colours warned him instantly.

Upon the morning following that swift descent upon The Silent House, Chan-fu stepped into this room arrayed in his richest robe, knelt before the Joss, took from the tray notes of the Chinese money and burnt them in propitiation—symbol that worldly wealth meant nothing to him in comparison with the wrath of his gods.

In deep intoning he chanted a supplication to his hideous idol, and, indeed, in his resonant voice there was a note which told that his prayer was one of appeasement.

Deeply, forehead to the very ground, again and again

he kowtowed; steadily that pile of money disappeared in smoke. By the broad opening between the Joss and that great bookcase, the still figure of the mute, Hwang, knelt, his forehead pressed to the ground.

There came a sudden rattle at the door and Peroda stumbled into the room. That the Senhor was nervous and ill at ease, was very evident. His sallow face had in it that greenish tinge which fear invariably brought, the dull eyes were furtive and anxious under their heavy lids.

"Doctor," he began nervously.

"*Silence!*" In an awful voice Chan-fu stopped him. The mute lifted his great head and from hard, cruel eyes glared upon him ominously.

Chan-fu went on with his devotions. With growing nervousness the Portuguese fidgeted about—shifted from place to place restlessly. Slowly Chan-fu lit a joss-stick and placed it before the hideous figure, then, with a final obeisance, arose and with a sign dismissed the mute. Upon Peroda he moved in cold menace. The Senhor, seeing his eyes, shrank back from him.

"Doctor," he commenced again, falteringly.

"Is it not enough," Chan-fu said in a deadly, wicked voice, "that I am served by fools, but that they must blunder in upon my sacred moments!"

"But—but I weesh to spik and . . ." the other stammered.

"Do I care of what you wish to speak? Never interrupt me at such a moment again."

Peroda made a frightened gesture.

"But ze eempor-tance . . ."

"No earthly matters," Chan-fu said in words cold and measured as a funeral march, "are of importance when I commune with my Joss. I am your master," he thundered

suddenly. "Yes . . . *your* master. But to that illustrious Joss I—even I—am as the lowest of slaves. Should you offend *me*, I will punish, but you will live. Should you offend *him* again, I will punish—and you will *not* live. Understand."

"You place heem before even your friends?" There was cringing protest in the Señhor's words.

Chan-fu drew himself up.

"I place him," he answered with words that burned with the fire of a fanatic, "where every man should place his God—before *everything*. I have an infinite pity for all peoples whose beliefs compel them to worship at the shrine of an invisible and indefinite Being. True joy can only be found in the worship of one's illustrious ancestry. My ancestors are my gods. They speak to me through this, their Joss. The Red Star of Yun-nan was the far-seeing eye of my Joss, handed down with him as each noble ancestor joined his fathers. The star belonged there for centuries"—he pointed with a rigid finger at the chain of brilliants about the idol's neck—"and when Richard Winsford stole it, he took with it my very soul. I say my soul because, although my Joss knows that some day I will return the Star to him, until that day I am fallen from his favour. Do you understand now why to recover it is to me before *everything*?"

"I—I teenk I do . . . yees."

Chan-fu dismissed the subject abruptly.

"Good. Now, what have you done while I rested?"

The Portuguese gave a wild despairing gesture.

"I haf tried nearly all the night to mak' thees girl spik, but she will not . . . noo. Not'ing I could do would mak' 'er say one word—excep' she do not know where the bonds are."

"Failure again." Chan-fu's tone was hard and cold.

"Gif me a leetle more time."

The Chinaman's eyes snapped quickly upon him.

"Time—and the bonds due for negotiation *to-day*! Unless they are in our hands soon they will be valueless!"

Peroda started.

"*To-day*!" he echoed aghast. "I—forget!"

"It is now eight o'clock. By noon they must be negotiated."

"Four hours! *Nombre di Dios*—onlee four hours."

"Exactly. The girl must be *made* to speak."

Above the door three green lights flickered intermittently, then one red. As they flashed in and out, the mute, Hwang, entered and stood waiting. Chan-fu gave him a signal.

Peroda, pacing up and down agitatedly, made an appeal.

"Let me 'ave one more try weet her," he begged, and into his fish-like eyes came that old, dull-red gleam. His thick, red lips twisted into an ugly snarl.

"You have tried—and failed," Chan-fu told him coldly. "There is no time for failure now. Benson is here; he had charge of things at The Silent House last night. He may have better news."

But Benson, it seemed, was not to lighten the tale of ill-success.

"I got here as soon and as quickly as I could, Doctor, but there's a nasty river-fog down on the Common this morning."

"And you come," said Chan-fu quietly, "to report failure. I see it in your face."

Benson shook his ungainly head dispiritedly.

"We've pulled the house to pieces during the night, but the bonds or the Star ain't there."

"You searched Winsford thoroughly?" Chan-fu questioned keenly.

"Yes."

A moment Chan-fu sat back thinking deeply.

"What did you do with it—his body?" he asked suddenly.

Benson stared from one to the other, befogged.

"Me," he answered. "Nothing. I left it where I found it."

"That is strange," observed Chan-fu slowly, musingly.

The deep-set eyes of the butler wandered from one to the other of the two men in perplexity.

"But—er—you took it away, I thought. When you took Mateo's."

"Peroda," said Chan-fu sharply, "you had charge of this. Where was Winsford's body when you brought away Mateo's?"

The Senhor stared at him blankly, then shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not know. Eet was not there—noo?"

Alarm joined despondency upon the butler's features.

"But—but it *must* have been!"

Peroda swung around upon him.

"Eet was not," he declared positively. "I theenk you 'ave take eet to ees room, so I breeng Mateo 'ere."

Nervousness, not to say fear, grew steadily in the big man's face. Moreover, it was repeated to an even greater degree in the oily features of Senhor Peroda. And it was a singular thing that with this new advent of his old enemy, fear, Joseph Benson began to drop his desperately

achieved politeness of manner. Under its paralyzing influence his outward gentility began to crumble rapidly. Joseph Benson made a sudden atavistic descent back into the hunted, fear-haunted, "Badger" Joe Hawkins.

"I never touched 'im beyond searchin' 'im," he asserted. A wave of memory overwhelmed him. "I—I don't like 'andlin' dead bodies," he said in almost a whisper. "And 'e was dam' dead. Ugh!" He looked helplessly again at the other two. What he saw in Peroda's face did nothing to re-assure him; but Chan-fu, as ever, was the same calm, human rock he had ever been. It was to him that he appealed.

"It's—it's damn'd funny, ain't it?"

"Not at all," was the quiet response, "Ho-fang has probably taken it."

Intense relief became instantly apparent upon Benson's face. He banged one great fist into the other with a loud clap.

"Blowed if I don't think you're right, Doctor," he exclaimed.

Chan-fu smiled. "Yes," he said, "I think we may safely say that is the explanation."

"You should 'a' took *my* advice about Ho-fang, Doctor, an' got rid of 'im long ago."

"Why?"

"'E's dangerous an' 'e worries me," Benson answered irritably. "I don' mind admittin' that."

Chan-fu's penetrating eyes moved searchingly over him.

"Leave Ho-fang to me," he said shortly. "Now to sum up. What have we accomplished? Nothing. The bonds were in my hands last night. They suddenly disappeared. Where?"

To which most interesting query not one of the three there present could contribute anything even remotely useful as an answer. It was plain to see that Peroda's despondency was gaining ground; Benson could have stood for a statue of Abyssmal Gloom. Suddenly, after several peregrinations up and down the floor, he turned abruptly upon Chan-fu.

"Look 'ere, Doctor," he said, "I ain't the one t' interfere, and you're the brains in this business. I just do what I'm told and takes my money—like I swore I would. Let me take the job in 'and a bit. S'far as I can see there's on'y one thing for it—the girl! She's got 'em right enough but she's keeping her teeth shut tight."

"Then it is for us to make her open her teeth," Chan-fu agreed with a snap.

"You let *me* 'ave a word with her?" Benson said grimly.

"You weel fin' 'er mos' obstinate," the Senhor informed him forlornly.

Chan-fu intervened.

"We will give Benson a chance to see what he can do," he said suavely. "Go, Peroda, bring her here."

Through that opening in the back of the room the Portuguese departed, leaving the big man who was to use his endeavours pacing up and down like some restless animal in a cage. That Benson was not happy about things, he, Peroda, knew; even Chan-fu's sudden acquiescence to his wish that he should be let interrogate the girl in his own way, had not seemed noticeably to brighten him. The Senhor felt a certain sympathy of feeling with him. The disappearance of the body of the man he personally had murdered did not augur well to him. The suggestion that it was probably in the hands of Ho-fang, did nothing

whatever to ease his mind. That small and exceedingly wily person was apparently also in Benson's mind at the moment—and uneasily at that.

"I 'ope Ho-fang don't smell 'er out," he muttered, more to himself than to his companion.

"Why should he?"

"I dunno. But if 'e does find 'er and they 'ave a chat, it'll be awkward, won't it?"

"If he finds her," Chan-fu agreed. "In the meantime, *you* are to make her tell us where she hid the bonds last night."

Benson snorted savagely: "I'll make 'er tell. Don't you worry."

"We shall see," was Chan-fu's enigmatic response.

He even seemed, to the man watching him, to be more amused than anything. Benson, again pacing up and down, saw nothing amusing in the present situation. Very much the reverse.

"What the 'ell's Peroda doin'?" he questioned irritably.

Chan-fu, casting a slow, quite impassive glance at him, smiled.

"My good Benson," said he, "you're nervous."

"I know I'm nervous," Benson blurted shortly. "But things ain't goin' right and—" A sudden thought startled him. "You—you got rid of Mateo safely, didn't you?"

Chan-fu smiled, but quite to himself.

"Mateo? My 'curious friend, there was not one trace of him left when my chemicals had done their work. I destroyed him as I destroy everything that is useless to me."

Benson stared at him fascinatedly.

"You Chinese are devils," he said with a shudder; "but you're dam' clever."

"We are clever—sometimes without being damned," Chan-fu retorted evenly.

From that opening by which Peroda had departed, the giant, Hwang, suddenly appeared. In his great arms, and gripped helpless as any kitten, was the girl, T'mala. Her face was white and drawn; traces of a horrible and sickening anxiety showed heavy upon it. But the big, brown eyes set in deep, tell-tale shadows were, strangely enough, steady and unwavering. From somewhere or other, in some inexplicable way, this girl had acquired a new courage. Chan-fu sensed it instantly. When the mute had placed her upon her feet, the eyes that met his were brave and unflinching. Watching her intently, in her proud, undaunted poise, in the very smile of calm fortitude she forced to her lips, he read one unmistakable thing.

This girl had snapped the shackles by which he had held her mentally chained. Though the slight, ill-used body was still prisoner in his hands to do with as he would, her mind, by some agency he could only guess at, was free. Only by the mightiest effort of his all-powerful will could he ever regain his power over it. But never by so much as the ripple of a muscle, the blink of an eyelid, did he show the thought which was in his mind.

CHAPTER XVII

LIVE OFFERING

IT was Chan-fu who, in his most courtly manner, got up, placed a chair for the girl, bowed to her and then crossed and re-seated himself. Hwang, at a gesture from his master dropped back. Peroda, glaring at her with vicious, red-shot eyes, kept away to one side. The big butler, his broken face working horribly, moved up and down with nervous, jumpy steps.

"What do you want with me, Doctor?" she asked quietly.

Equally quietly Chan-fu answered: "My dear, we are anxious to ask you one or two questions."

She looked at him steadily.

"If it is about those papers—bonds—I can answer you nothing."

Chan-fu bowed and smiled pleasantly.

"I do not propose asking, T'mala. It is Mr. Benson who fancies he can persuade you to speak."

He took a long, green-jade cigarette holder from his table, placed a cigarette in it, lit it and prepared himself to listen comfortably. Upon his lean face the only expression apparent was one of gentle amusement. Instantly Benson came down to where the girl sat, standing over her truculently; arms akimbo, legs wide apart.

"Now, my girl," he growled, "I'm a goin' to speak to you for y'r good."

A rippling laugh of contempt was the only answer she gave. At the alarmingly unusual sound, Peroda started, watching her nervously. Chan-fu, one thought in his mind, watched her with unblinking eyes. It lashed Benson into a nervous fury.

"Stop that," he bawled, his huge fist suddenly clenched, "Stop it, or by Gawd I'll . . ."

Quietly she stood up and faced him.

"Yes?" she asked.

"I'll bash yer face in for yer!"

She shook her head slowly, her steady eyes fixed upon his. "You haven't the courage," she said.

The big, brutal-looking face writhed, distorted with rage. With an animal-like snarl his gnarled fist rose over her white face . . . then slowly dropped to his side. With an oath he turned away.

"I thought not," she said.

From Chan-fu a dry, hard chuckle came. The sound of it brought Benson around upon her again, mouthing with rage.

"Now look 'ere," he shouted. "Don't try any 'ank with me."

"No?"

"No! You answer what I ask."

"And—if I don't?"

He pushed his face into hers: "It'll be the worse for you," he said, an infinity of meaning in the words.

But neither the words nor the wicked inflexion he gave them made her flinch—or even wince.

"Suppose that you answer me one question," she said, and went on before he could interrupt her. "Tell me, what are you, Captain Winsford's servant, doing here with these men?"

The big man's mouth opened sharply, but he did not speak; only a catchy breath came from it.

"That's my affair," he snarled and turned away again.

"And Captain Winsford's—when I tell him," followed after him.

Again he turned back to her, his face working spasmodically. Not at all a pretty picture was the erstwhile "Badger" Hawkins at this moment.

"When!" he sneered. "You'll find that a difficult job." Then: "Winsford's dead!" he shot pitilessly at her. He stopped, frightened a little by the ghastly look of horror which dawned in her face at his words.

For a moment she did not, could not, speak, the faint vestige of colour that had come to her face since Benson began his baiting, receded slowly out again, leaving it like some piece of living marble from forehead to quickly palpitating throat. No sound came from her livid lips, not even the faintest moan, but the haggard, stricken eyes she turned upon the bully made him drop his own to the floor and get a little away from her.

"So—so now y' know," he proceeded unevenly and in a different tone—one that he thought conveyed a certain amount of kindness. It was dawning slowly upon him that he had made a mistake—if not more than one—in this self-sought interview. And assuredly the knowledge pressed upon him that this frail, helpless girl was stronger in mind and courage than was he. In his stubborn bulldog fashion there was a certain grudging admiration for her growing upon him. But that things were in the desperate plight they were, a complete revulsion of feeling could easily have arisen in him for her. He found himself wishing to God she'd say something instead of just fixing those big eyes on him; eyes, at this moment, not un-

like those of some timid calf just struck by the butcher's axe.

"And it's no use kickin' against us, my gal," he started again, but without looking directly at her. "Now then—what did y' do with those bonds last night?"

"You mean," she said in a very still voice, "just before you murdered Captain Winsford?"

He gave a great start. Beads of sweat started suddenly on his forehead.

"That's a lie!" he snapped. "I wasn't there!"

"Then how do you know I took the bonds?" she asked in the same still tone.

Benson, forced against his will to meet her eyes, strangely calm again he noticed, stared at her in panicky bewilderment. From where he stood he could see that Peroda's face had gone a funny grey colour, his face too was glistening with sweat. From Chan-fu there came again that curious dry, hard chuckle.

"And if I had them, or knew where they were," the girl continued, "I would not give them up to you. They belong to Captain Winsford. If—if"—an instant her voice faltered—"he is dead—as you say . . ."

A voice reached her—the suave, calm tones of Chan-fu.

"I regret, T'mala, that it is true," he interpolated softly. "Your friend is dead."

". . . then you, Benson, must have had some hand in it," she went on, not heeding the interruption.

Mortal fear, that old ever-haunting terror, clutched again at Benson with icy fingers. He backed away; eyes staring, lips trembling.

"I tell y' I never 'ad nothink t' do with it," he well-nigh screamed at her in a cracked voice. "I—I wasn't even there."

"You are a treacherous brute," she accused. "And I will tell Captain Barty where to seek for the murderer of his friend."

She looked around at all there. Peroda, his lips working, slunk a little further away from her. Alone Chan-fu remained his immobile self—seemed, indeed, a little amused.

"And where is that, my dear?" he asked.

"Amongst you three," she answered him bluntly.

He smiled.

"A charge," he said smoothly, "brought by a half-wit."

"You will have greater difficulty, Doctor, to prove me a half-wit," she assured him quietly, "than I shall to prove that one of you—if not all three—murdered Captain Winsford."

"Hold on a minute," Benson interjected nervously. "What's to stop the Doctor chargin' Winsford with murderin' Mateo? What's . . ."

She gave him one look of cold contempt that brought him up.

"Charge a dead man?" she asked quietly. "And if that were so, why was Mateo's body smuggled in here last night?"

For the second time the big man stood as if turned to stone. Peroda passed a dry tongue over still drier lips.

"And who says," Chan-fu asked in a steely voice, "that Mateo's body was brought here?"

"I do," she answered bravely. "I saw it from my window. Peroda and someone else I could not distinguish carried it in."

Again the Senhor Leon Peroda's tongue went across his parched lips. His eyes held something now of the look of a rat in a corner.

Chan-fu, composed as ever, got quietly out of his chair, moved across and stood looking down upon her.

"So," he began in his silkiest, most caressing voice, "you have been watching things here, eh? There are things you have heard too, perhaps?"

"Heard!" The dark eyes blazed suddenly into unwonted fire. "Did you think I was both blind and deaf," she demanded of him with undreamed of vehemence, "when I was free of the spell you hold over me? Just now you called me a half-wit. I might have been once, but not now, Doctor, not now." He opened his lips to speak but she disregarded him and rushed blindly on. "You told Captain Winsford that I was a mad woman, under your care. *Your care!*" her voice rose hysterically. She pointed at one of the windows. "There are people out there who would tear you limb from limb if they learned what I have suffered *under your care*. Well! this is the end. I don't stand it any longer."

From Chan-fu came three mocking words. He had not moved one muscle of his inscrutable face through her passionate tirade; just stood regarding her calmly, as he might have done any object of interest new to him.

"Is—that—so?" he asked quietly.

She moved swiftly towards the opening near the ugly Joss. Chan-fu placed his finger upon the table. A green light flickered an instant over the entrance to that dimly lit passage. The giant deaf-mute stood suddenly before her, barring her way. She shrank back with a quick catch of her breath.

Chan-fu pointed to the carpet before him.

"Come here," he ordered curtly.

"I will not," she answered quickly.

"Here," he repeated inexorably. "I—will—it."

She stood still, regarding him defiantly.

Again, his narrowed eyes fixed upon her as might those of a great snake upon its shivering, horror-fascinated victim, he repeated his words:

"Here. *I—will—it!*"

"You have not the power to make me," she told him firmly.

Slowly, hand outstretched towards her, he came to her until his face was very close to hers. She shivered slightly at the nearness of him, but her eyes met his steadily.

"*You—will—do,*" he said in a low yet indescribably penetrating voice, "*as—I—will—you—to do.*"

For seconds, it seemed an interminable time to those breathlessly watching, they stared each into the face of the other. A dark flush crept under Chan-fu's amber coloured skin with the intensity of his effort to force her back once again under his thrall. But the eyes of the girl never for an instant wavered. Suddenly she walked past him, leaving him limp against the bookcase.

"My dear," he said slowly, almost weakly, "you are to be congratulated. When, if I may ask, did you feel that my power over you was weakening?"

"A few days ago," she told him truthfully.

"Ah." A strange smile flickered a moment at his thin lips. "It dates, perhaps," he suggested almost musingly, "from the time you met this Captain Winsford?"

A slow flush mantled the young white face.

"Yes," she said frankly, "I seemed to gather courage from him. And . . ."

. . . and now," Chan-fu broke in with that mocking note, "he is dead."

He watched the dark head droop slowly towards her chest, caught the involuntary sob she bravely stifled. Then he moved down and touched her gently upon her quivering shoulder. "There—there," he said softly—encouragingly.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked, with a great effort at calmness.

He shrugged his shoulders, regarding her doubtfully, as might a man who has some new and intriguing problem before him for immediate consideration.

"I am afraid I cannot keep you here any longer," he replied. "You are quite useless to me now."

"Then I may go?" she asked eagerly.

Again he considered her slowly before answering. She watched him nervously, anxiously.

"You may go—certainly," he said at length. "But not yet. The real issue is not yet decided."

"I don't understand," she stammered. "Issue?"

"The bonds. If I permit you to go now, you will have something under four hours to redeem them."

"But I haven't got them!" she cried earnestly.

"So you have said," he rejoined with the utmost calmness. "Unfortunately, I do not believe you."

"If she won't speak—she won't speak," burst from Benson gloomily.

Chan-fu smiled: "Sound logic, my dear Benson, good sound logic—to the Western mind."

"If we can't make her, you can't," was the moody retort. "Women are obstinate cusses."

"My dear Benson," Chan-fu told him softly, "there

are many avenues of—er—persuasion open to we Eastern men of science that the average mortal would not dream of.” He went quietly up to the great bookcase and patted it gently—even affectionately. “There is a little invention of mine here that should prove wonderfully efficacious in loosening the tongue of even the most obstinate—man or woman.”

He placed his hand upon a hidden spring, and the whole front of the bookcase with its tomes opened out as two doors. He gave the mute Hwang a gestured signal. Instantly the whole interior of the case lighted, revealed itself as one great cabinet, the front of which was protected by plate glass of incredible thickness.

With a chill terror growing at her heart, the girl listening to his calm measured words stared at it in horrible fascination.

“I should have hesitated to use it on a woman,” he continued in that soft, but deadly wicked voice, “because I do not care to disfigure them—to turn beauty into a thing of horror. There are occasions, of course,” he added deprecatingly, “when any such sentiment, or hesitation, would be foolish—entirely superfluous. I can control this cabinet, from here or in another room, and fill it with a corrosive acid gas beside which—as an example—*hydrocyanic*, or what you would call Prussic acid, taken internally, is a gentle stimulant—a tonic for infants. An acid gas so terrible in its effect upon the persons placed inside, that in a short space of time—we will say fifteen minutes—it is impossible to recognize that they were once human beings.”

He paused: there was an unearthly stillness in the room.

"Have you ever been burned by steam, Benson?" he asked mildly.

"Once," came falteringly in answer.

"Then try to imagine something a thousand times more painful. A man once offended me," he went on reminiscently, "no matter how. I placed him in there. The gas filled his eyes and burned them from their sockets; scalded the hair from its roots. He tried to speak—to scream through that panel to me for mercy—his tongue was eaten out, destroyed as he did so." Once again there came from him that short, horrible laugh. Those who looked at him saw that his expression was that of cold, calm madness—the madness of cruelty, born of fanaticism; yet, in him, deadly still and reasoned; scientifically calculated to the last drained drop of human endurance.

Once as he spoke, the stony, now utterly pitiless eyes turned upon the girl. He saw that she stood like a clothed statue, immovable; dumb—stricken. Cold sweat rolled down the cheeks of the bull-headed Benson and dripped unheeded upon his clothes. Only Peroda showed no horror—the hellish machine was not held over *him* in threat. But watching the Chinaman's face, remembering his words, a shivering fit seized upon him; he became horribly afraid.

"Even this room," Chan-fu told him, "is but one great lethal chamber—when I choose to make it so. Another invention of mine. I can fill it with a suffocating gas of my own, and anyone so unfortunate as to be left in it could not possibly live for longer than ten minutes. They would have the life choked out of them far, far more surely, Benson, than you could do it with those hands of yours. And *that* death is peaceful and painless"—he tapped the bookcase softly—"compared with this little toy of mine."

In a terrible stillness he walked slowly to the girl and pointed a long threatening finger at her. "Now, T'mala," he said softly, horribly softly, "we will try *my* method."

Benson, a horrified look upon his broken face, woke from a kind of stunned lethargy.

"But you won't do that to *her*!" he shouted. "I won't stand for it! I won't!"

"Benson!" The word came with the snap of a threat.

"She's a white woman, dam' y', an' I won't stand by and see it done!"

Then those terrible stony eyes of Chan-fu fixed upon him in so fiendishly malignant a glance that he dropped back appalled. His mind went suddenly back across the years to the Chan-fu of another day, to the strange things he had known—things unaccountable, utterly inexplicable. Breathing hard, he stood still, waiting for Chan-fu to say his say.

"Perhaps," he was saying, "it will be equally as effective if I have *you* put in there instead of her—so that she may watch. She may speak then!"

The venom in his voice spoke volumes as to the utter ruthlessness of the man. Even the dogged human bull-dog just beneath the veneer of the butler was daunted by the cold, expressionless mask of evil Chan-fu turned upon him.

"You—you bloody devil!" he gasped.

Chan-fu smiled: a long, lingering leer of fathomless cruelty.

"Precisely. Stand aside," he ordered, and Benson stepped back, gnawing with nervous savagery at his finger nails.

Chan-fu made a signal to the mute and laid his hand upon the wrist of the girl. Hwang slowly opened the door of the cabinet. Chan-fu felt the slender figure shudder from head to heel.

"Now listen to me," he said, still in that awful tone in which he had addressed Benson. "I will ask you a question and you will answer it truthfully or, by the God you believe in, you will die a death so terrible that it is beyond your power to even imagine it. *What did you do with the bonds last night?*"

"I did nothing," the girl answered him in a tortured whisper.

"I will give you until I have counted five to answer. *One. Two. Three. Four.*"

Unseen by her, the mute moved soundlessly until he stood at her back; his gleaming eyes fastened upon his master—waiting.

"I—I—did—nothing," came from her ashen grey lips.

"*Five!*" He flung his hand up. Instantly she was in the grip of the mighty mute and carried to the door of that dreadful cabinet.

"There is still time," Chan-fu warned her.

"You can't make me speak of what I do not know!" she shrilled despairingly.

"What did you do with the bonds?" he asked again impassively.

"I tell you I did *nothing!* I . . ."

The door clanged upon her. Through the glass they could see her mouth working in frantic screams, her slight hands beating upon it madly. Then they saw her stop and draw into the back of the diabolical death-cage, her great eyes staring upon Chan-fu in piteous entreaty. At a sig-

nal from Chan-fu, Hwang, with evident reluctance, left the room.

"By God!" broke from Benson, "I can't stay here!"

"Squeamish at seeing a half-wit put to a little pain?" Chan-fu sneered.

Benson flashed back upon him: "She's no half-wit!" he bellowed. "She's as sane as anyone here!"

"She says she has suffered here before," Chan-fu's calm voice went on, entirely heedless of the other. "Watch her when I turn this crank."

He lifted his hand towards the side of his ghastly invention then, with a sudden start, stayed it—listening.

A strange whining hum pervaded the room—the sound, it might have been, of a swarm of angry bees.

Benson was the first to speak.

"What is it, Doctor?" he asked in a whisper.

In a similar whisper, his face set and tense, Chan-fu answered him.

"The signal that there is some one strange in the grounds. Hwang must have found traces of them."

"Some one *strange*," Benson gasped, "Who?"

Peroda looked from one to the other in silent apprehension.

"That we will soon discover. You, Peroda, go to the tower window. Search everything around through the glasses."

Peroda starting swiftly towards that ill-lit opening was stopped by Chan-fu's voice.

"Not that way," he ordered. "Come."

Against a certain spot in the tapestry-hung wall, he pressed his finger. Instantly a dragon-embellished panel swung outwards, disclosing a narrow passage. Into it the

Señhor disappeared at once. "At the end of this," Chan-fu instructed Benson, "there are steps leading to the outer gate. Watch them for twenty minutes. If nothing happens, go back to The Silent House! I will come to you as soon as I find out"—his hand moved towards the pseudo-bookcase—"what I wish to know. Keep close watch!"

Benson gone, the panel door once more closed and giving no sign of its existence, Chan-fu, his face clouded, moved back into his beautiful room of horror. Through the glass he contemplated the spectacle of the wretched creature locked in that hell-designed cabinet; saw that her eyes were upon him in an agony. Then, as though having debated something in his mind, he suddenly closed the two bookcase doors and buttoned them into position. Instantly it became a beautiful and innocuous piece of Oriental furniture; possible to raise only one emotion in human breast: covetousness—certainly not suspicion.

"Entirely sound-proof from inside," Chan-fu apostrophized it. "She will be safer there—for the present."

He was moving slowly towards the passage, when, as though invoked out of air by some magician, Hwang appeared before him. He spoke rapidly in signals to his master; then, in answer to a dismissing gesture, he again vanished. For some seconds Chan-fu stood gazing reverently upon the hideous effigy which to him was Lord and Master of the Universe. "I will give her to you, Great Joss of my Illustrious Ancestors! Her tortured body shall be human sacrifice to you that it may appease your wrath against me."

Then with a bitter sigh, turned away—to stand in rigid astonishment at what his eyes fell upon.

In the opening, looking around the room and its con-

tents in considerable amazement, was the man he had left for dead but a few hours back! And but for the fact that one arm was slung, a less dead man than Captain George Winsford could scarcely be conceived!

CHAPTER XVIII

CHAN-FU STRIKES

“**H**OW d’ye do?” Winsford greeted him coolly and stepped into the room. Without the movement of one muscle of his face, Chan-fu bowed deeply.

“Good morning,” he returned.

“I was just passing,” the Captain mentioned casually, “and I couldn’t deny myself the pleasure of looking you up. Hope I haven’t blown in at an awkward moment?”

Chan-fu shook his sleek black head.

“Not at all.” A gentle significance came into his voice. “I’m delighted to have you here.”

“Thank you.”

The penetrating eyes of the Chinaman wandered over the face of his most unexpected visitor. Beyond a certain slight loss of colour and that tell-tale arm, not the faintest trace was there to be seen of his misadventure of the previous night. His eyes were clear and healthy—though, Chan-fu saw, a trifle colder and brighter than he had seen them before. Nor was the Chinaman deceived by the pleasant, casual manner of his uninvited guest. This man meant business, and ugly business at that; moreover, he was one of those intrepid English fools who do not know when they are beaten.

Behind the polite commonplaces with which they fenced with one another, there was gradually building up in that

room an atmosphere charged with the hatred of two men, each of whom meant the destruction of the other. Neither was the less watchful, or dangerous, in that he dealt for the moment in smiles instead of blows. That time would doubtless come—and before long.

"If one may ask," Chan-fu said smoothly. "I should be interested to know just how you got in here?"

"Certainly. I knew it was no good speaking to that deaf and dumb servant of yours, so while he was nosing about in the garden—it's very foggy out there, by the way—I just slipped in close behind him. Not happening to turn around, he didn't see me; being deaf he couldn't hear me. And—er—here I am."

Chan-fu inclined his head.

"A totally unexpected pleasure, I assure you."

"I thought you'd appreciate it," returned Winsford calmly.

The Doctor indicated a chair: "Will you be seated?" he asked courteously.

"Thanks—awfully." With the utmost deliberation Winsford carefully re-set the proffered chair so that he could command sight of whoever entered the dim, hazy opening between the Joss and that ornate bookcase.

"Quaint sort of show you've got here," he commented, looking about him.

"Yes. To your eyes, doubtless. This is where I do my most important work." He took from the table a box of cigarettes and offered them. "Cigarette?"

Winsford markedly took his own case from his pocket. "No thanks—some here. Getting conservative," he announced, "about smokes, drinks, and—er—what not. Fancy my own are better for my health—what?"

A thin smile played about Chan-fu's lips for a moment. He picked a box of matches from the table and offered them.

"Matches?"

From his pocket Winsford took a lighter and flicked it into flame. "Got my own, thank you."

At which Chan-fu burst into one of the very rare laughs of his lifetime. It was genuine and unaffected, and Winsford joined in quite cheerfully. But neither for one instant lost sight of the snarl behind the other's laugh.

"You English," remarked the Chinaman, "have strange prejudices." He took a cigarette from the despised box, affixed it in his long jade holder, then lit it with one of the scorned matches.

"Yes," Winsford was saying, "quaint mob, ain't we? Simply won't do what other people insist on us doing. Take a lot of shifting and all that. National characteristic. Bull-doggy, as you might say."

Chan-fu acquiesced pleasantly.

"A tenacious people, undoubtedly," he agreed. "So, I fancy, are we Chinese."

"Not a doubt of it," Winsford hastened to admit. "Great stickers—not a doubt of it."

The sloe, almond eyes flickered amusedly an instant. "Unquestionably so," he corroborated.

Again Winsford looked about him with tremendous interest:

"This is a quaint show." He pointed to the Joss. "Er—relative of yours?" he inquired politely.

The almond eyes hardened; red flame snapped an instant in their black depths, then disappeared.

"My illustrious Joss," Chan-fu explained impassively.

"And the Joss of my forefathers for many centuries." With almost detachment in his voice he proceeded. "The Star you have heard of belongs to my Joss."

"The Star? Oh, yes. Old Peroda of Annam mentioned the Star—the Red Star, he called it, if I remember. How is he, by the way?"

"Very well, I fancy," Chan-fu answered in a completely disinterested tone.

"Ah. You should stop that silly ass Peroda of Annam, Doctor," Winsford advised with the utmost casualness. "Next time I meet him he will sadly need your professional services. Y' know, slipping cold steel into one's friends isn't playing the game. Fortunately the shoulder-blade stopped it and turned it to one side. But a chap can't be expected to keep up to the mark on that sort of diet, now can he? I put it to you as a medical man?"

Chan-fu smiled dryly.

"And as a medical man I might ask is it wise to venture out so soon after a—a nasty accident?"

Thoughtfully, very thoughtfully, the other surveyed him.

"Well," he drawled, "perhaps hardly wise, Doctor, but *very necessary*."

A stranger watching these two men thrusting and parrying with polite words, occasionally feeling one another out with a blow of heavier verbal metal, would have realized that they were very near to that moment when the gloves would come off—the buttons be taken from the glittering foils. The smoothness of both was too glacial: the quietness unnatural.

Chan-fu moved a little towards the edge of his chair.

"Candidly," he observed placidly, "I thought you were dead."

In precisely the same voice Winsford answered him.

"Candidly, I felt dead, Doctor; very dead indeed. But, as you say, we're a hardy lot of blighters."

A sudden and quite unusual sound struck upon his keenly attuned ears. He sat up, screwed his monocle firmly in his eye, and began to glance again with apparently careless interest about the room. Chan-fu sat perfectly still; only his eyes followed the direction of those of his guest. His lean face expressed nothing; nothing whatever. Again that sound reached both the listening men: involuntarily Winsford lifted his head sharply.

"What is it?" asked Chan-fu calmly.

Winsford cursed himself for his betraying movement. However it was done—and spotted. The only thing left to do was to follow the game up unsuspiciously.

"Didn't you hear anything? I *thought* I heard a sound like—er—someone in pain." From the corner of his eye he watched the effect of his words upon the other. There was no effect—none at all.

The Doctor smiled at him, an amused and indulgent smile.

"It is very probable," he agreed. "Though I did not notice it. You see, this is a private hospital, and it is not always possible to prevent one's patients having to endure a little pain." The look he followed his words up with was a direct challenge: it took the other aback for the moment.

"No, of course not, no," he repeated thoughtfully. "I'd somehow forgotten that you were that kind of a doctor."

Which, indeed, was perfect truth. That this murdering, torturing yellow swine could be also one who gave his time and labours to the amelioration of suffering human-

ity seemed unbelievable. Not only that, but an utter and ludicrous anomaly.

"And what then did you think I was?" Chan-fu inquired quietly, his eyes fixed unblinkingly upon the other.

Winsford gave a disconcerted half laugh.

"Blessed if I know," he answered slowly. "You Chinese are—are interested in so many things, aren't you?"

"A great many, I admit. In this case it happens to be an operation I had performed just before you"—he bowed—"so happily called. The patient is in the next room. No doubt she . . ."

Winsford leaned forward quickly. Guarded as he was, he could not prevent the open hostility which suddenly blazed in his grey eyes.

"She . . ." he snapped.

Chan-fu regarded him a moment coolly.

"*She*," he repeated with marked emphasis. "I daresay she had just come out of the anæsthetic."

"I—I see," Winsford said thoughtfully. "Then that was why it sounded so—so close?"

Chan-fu flicked the ashes from his cigarette.

"Undoubtedly," he said.

A silence fell for a moment. Winsford, thinking rapidly, could have kicked himself for his sudden show of feeling. Glancing at the impassive mask which was the face of Chan-fu, he realized that there was only one of two games to play. Either to finesse until he could trap the other into some damaging admission, or come, Jack Blunt, at the point and see if the Chinaman could maintain that inscrutable nonchalance much longer. The first was not much in his line; was indeed totally against every dictate of his straightforward nature. Moreover, he told himself depressedly, so far as it had gone, he was not

making much headway upon the one point he wanted to assure himself of—the safety of the girl. The Chinaman was too wily, too subtle-brained for him to ever score over him in a duel of wits. His jaw shutting down grimly, he made up his mind.

“How is Miss T’mala?” he fired suddenly.

For an instant the bluntness of the question took Chan-fu by surprise; but his answer when it came was as smooth and calculated as ever.

“That,” he said with a regretful shake of his head, “I am not in a position to tell you. From the moment of the—the unfortunate occurrence you spoke of—er . . .”

“You mean when Peroda knifed me in the back,” Winsford cut him short. “Well?”

“She has disappeared.”

Like two steely pin-points the grey eyes fastened upon the black ones. “You mean—escaped?” Winsford asked slowly.

“If you care to put it in that way—yes.”

Winsford drew deeply upon his cigarette then tossed it into an ash-tray. So that was the line this man was going to take, was it? T’mala—or whatever her real name was—had escaped out of his hands. After what Ho-fang had seen only a little over three hours ago! But he bottled his wrath back—for the moment he’d play the other’s game.

“No other way of putting it but ‘escaped,’ is there? She had reason—good reason to fear for her life—and worse. Escaped is the only word.”

Chan-fu lifted his oblique eyebrows; the faintest shrug moved his silk-clad shoulders.

“As I told you last night—the wildest hallucinations.”

“Which turned to remarkably stubborn realities,”

Winsford retorted. "There weren't many hallucinations about what she charged you with last night. I told you then I didn't believe you. I'll tell it to you in plainer words now. You're a damned liar! And further, if she doesn't come to light, and quickly too, I'll make you say in an open court just what you refuse to tell me now."

Again the gentle shrug lifted Chan-fu's shoulders. A soft, but unmistakably ironic smile came to the thin lips. But deep down in the black eyes a murderous light gleamed steadily. Winsford was under no misapprehension about that smile.

"Do I understand you to mean the police?" Chan-fu inquired of him quietly.

"You do," was the blunt answer.

Chan-fu's smile broadened in mocking irony.

"You underrate your own intelligence," he said softly.

Winsford got up. "I don't underrate *yours*," he said. Then: "You're the . . ."

Yet again that sound stopped him; but this time it came louder, plain for all in that room to hear. A soft, muffled thudding like . . . no, not just quite like anything Winsford had heard before. And it was near—very near. Chan-fu rose slowly; there was no attempt upon his part to conceal the obvious fact of his hearing it.

Winsford eyed him narrowly. There was something dam'd rummy about this sound. As for its being made by a patient just come out of an anæsthetic—that was all my eye.

"Oh," he said curtly, "so you *have* noticed it this time. 'What is it?'" he demanded.

"Precisely what I told you it was," Chan-fu answered evenly. "One of my patients. If you will excuse me, I will see to her."

"I should," said the other, distrust in every line of his face.

As Chan-fu passed him, he suddenly shot out his right hand, clamped it upon his shoulder and spun him round.

"And don't try any funny business," he advised. "I'm a good-tempered man as a rule, but I can be damned nasty at times. And this," he hissed wickedly, "is one of the times."

"I am afraid," Chan-fu answered him imperturbably, "that I have not the time to discuss the psychology of your temper."

A sudden surge of cold passion swept through Winsford, half choking him. He held his clenched fist before the Chinaman's eyes.

"Do you see that hand," he demanded thickly.

"It is perfectly visible," the other assured him quite unemotionally.

"It is. I just want to tell you that I don't know who the lady was that came to me for protection, and I don't greatly care. But if any harm comes to her from you, that hand will choke the life out of you."

"That," Chan-fu told him quietly, "will happen as the Fates decree—not as you desire."

"This hand," Winsford retorted, "will do as I desire—and damn the Fates!"

With that enigmatic and horribly ironic smile upon his face, Chan-fu listened politely; and as he did so his long, lean fingers dropped lightly upon a table by his hand. A moment they remained so. When he lifted them a great change had come over the back of that room, a change quite undreamed of by the man threatening him. Great sheets of iron or steel had rolled soundlessly over that passage. A new wall had come into inanimate being; a

wall utterly impregnable: tool-proof, sound-proof—and even *air*-proof.

Quietly Chan-fu crossed the room, touched some spring that opened a panelled door. It swung inwards and he passed quietly out of sight. Noiselessly it closed after him. From the middle of the room Winsford stared at it dumbfounded.

"What the devil is his little game now?" he asked himself.

He strolled across to the door and looked at it. The closest examination failed to reveal handle, lock, or indeed any way whatever of opening it. Testing it, he found it as firm as the wall itself.

"Ah," he said thoughtfully.

A thought occurred to him. He went up to that opening by which he had entered and drew aside the curtain,—a blank, impassable wall barred his way. For a moment or two he gave it his whole attention, even to tapping it with his finger.

"Phew!" he whistled softly. "Steel, begad!"

By that panelled door Chan-fu re-entered noiselessly and stood a moment watching his back in silence. His hand dropped idly upon the table.

"Did you call?" he asked quietly.

Winsford started around.

"No." He came down the room carelessly.

"I thought it possible you found you could not wait, and wished to go," Chan-fu suggested blandly.

Winsford shot a straight, hard look at him.

"It would be all the same if I did," he said bluntly, jerking his thumb in the direction of the back wall. "That steel door would take a bit of getting through. What's the idea?"

Chan-fu returned his look with one equally direct.

"The idea?" he asked, then shook his head at a loss. "I am afraid I do not understand."

"Oh, you understand right enough," Winsford said, holding his temper back with increasing difficulty. "But to make sure"—he strode up and dragged the curtains aside again—"I mean . . ." His voice trailed off into an astounded silence. The passage was there, just as he had entered by it. "Well—I'll be dam'd!" he uttered blankly. "That's funny—damn funny."

Chan-fu waved a careless hand towards the opening.

"You wish to go?"

Winsford stood looking at him curiously, his mind a perfect medley of thoughts, ideas, and suspicions. What the devil game was this Chinaman playing? For the life of him he could not make out. Somewhere under it there was some sudden trick which would bowl him over once and for all, unless he was mighty careful. Somewhere under this suave, bland, impervious to any insult manner, Chan-fu had something up that wide, capacious sleeve of his which, once out, would prove as deadly as a rattlesnake. The gleam of red murder which had shown in those slanting eyes when he had called their owner a liar, told a plain enough story for any man, not altogether a fool, to read aright. And now this go-if-you-please bluff. Just what was at the back of that?

Deep the two looked into each other's eyes. Winsford made a quick decision.

"I might as well," he bluffed easily. "You seem to be busy."

He picked up his hat and stick, every sense tensed for sudden happenings as he did so, and turned towards the opening. As he was passing the Doctor, for the third

time that curious noise occurred and this time closer to him than ever. Yet *not* quite the same noise—this time there was in it some faint suggestion of something being done to, or on glass. But one thing admitted of no argument—no doubt. The noise, whatever it was, was closer to him than ever it had been. This came from no patient awakening from an anæsthetic near by. *The noise he was listening to was in this very room.* And for all the blank, expressionless face he showed, Chan-fu was listening to it too.

As if acting upon a suddenly-revised decision, Winsford replaced his hat and stick.

"Upon second thoughts," he announced composedly, "I'll wait until you've seen to that patient of yours."

Chan-fu bowed, then without a word turned back to that spring door by which he had entered the room. He was passing through when Winsford hailed him.

"Oh, by the way," he said. "You might leave that steel contraption of yours *open* this time." He took a quick glimpse around; the passage was perfectly open. "That's all right—but I don't like to feel—er—too shut in, you know."

Left alone, he sat perfectly still for a moment, watching the door by which Chan-fu had departed. He had a knack of appearing too swiftly and noiselessly through it for Winsford's liking. But, so far as a man might tell, it seemed a fairly safe thing to take a look-see about. Stepping soundlessly from his chair he made a quick dart up to the curtained opening. No sign of that steel wall was there to be seen; nor indeed the faintest trace of where it had come from, how it fitted—nothing.

"That's clever," he muttered, at something of a loss, and turned along the walls.

As he moved, and perfectly unconscious of the threat, in the right hand of the hideous Joss of the Chan-fu there appeared suddenly a dark-steel automatic pistol. Wherever Winsford moved it was steadily trained upon him: when he turned towards the figure, the arm fell limply to the side of it, concealing the weapon most effectively.

And as he went slowly, stealthily about the room, endeavouring with all his ears to locate that mysterious sound which still at intervals kept coming, he began to be conscious of a certain nervous dread creeping upon him. Not for himself, but for the safety of that unhappy girl he knew Chan-fu to have once again in his hands.

It was a strange house this, a devilish house; a place where malignant forces seemed to be constantly working, just as at times one could feel their nearness at The Silent House. Was there anything in this Joss business, he wondered? In this unappeased god who had been robbed and was making his wrath felt—with one single, diabolical, never-altering purpose?

It seemed all—all rubbish for a sane man to believe; and yet—if everything he had been told was true, and his uncle *had* taken some part in despoiling that hideous image of its Red Star, the curse of something or someone, inanimate idol or living devil, was following it and leaving a terrible track. His uncle dead—unquestionably of violence. Himself, but a few hours from the narrowest escape a man could have. But for the bang on the jaw he had given Peroda that rattled his senses, had his hand and eye been as usual, he, George Winsford, would have followed his uncle along the bloody trail of the Red Star. Nothing more certain than *that!*

And this girl, this beautiful, unhappy creature he was seeking for. Was she also another who had become en-

tangled in this far-flung web of vengeance? Or was she innocent of everything to do with it, and simply a chance obtained victim; a sacrifice to this yellow man's damnable occult arts? He did not know; moreover, did not care. So far as she was concerned, one thing was certain: she came out of the toils of this oriental *fakir* of cheap magic who worked his spells with the aid of cut-throats—or Chan-fu would have a bitter reckoning to settle with him.

He moved towards the beautiful bookcase and took one or two volumes from it at random.

"'Schonberg on the Theory of Mental Reaction,'" he read. "H'm. 'The Brain as an Organ of Mind. Bastian.'"

From nowhere, out of the ether for all he could see, Chan-fu's voice suddenly addressed him. The start he gave nearly sent the book flying from his hand.

"Winsford!"

"Hullo," he answered. "Where the devil are you?"

The voice chuckled: "In another room—quite close. I am speaking through a microphone. Do not be alarmed."

Not without an effort, Winsford laughed. If startling him had been the Chinaman's idea, he thought, he'd succeeded surely enough. What the devil was all this game? . . . that tapping . . . it was plainly audible just now. What under the skies did it all portend?

He took another cigarette from his case, lit it, and sat down in the chair the Chinaman had occupied to think the thing out. It was a toughish proposition—there were things here entirely out of his depth; things, forces at work, that he had never encountered before in his whole lifetime. Peroda—the unfortunate devil someone had murdered, Mateo, was it? That kind were easily handled, but in this sinister Chinese Doctor there was very different metal. To deal with him, a man wanted . . .

From somewhere behind him, and high up in the wall—one of those two windows he had noticed, he supposed—a voice was addressing him. A curiously familiar and an infernally welcome one—the voice of Ho-fang.

"Clapt'n! Clapt'n" it hissed, then instantly warned him: "No look aloud, not mlove. Ho-fang speak."

"Yes?"

"You alone," the voice of the little Chinaman went on. "all-slame, they wlatch you. Hwang, him wlatch you from Joss—mluch plenny big gun—no good, no good. Hwang no can speak, no can hear—all-slame see mluch plenny goddam qlick. Sabe?"

Without movement, Winsford, rigid as the Joss itself, got out a quick affirmative.

"Flirs' chance you glet, you fix Hwang. Then glo alonga bookcase."

"Bookcase?"

"*Hoki*. Lit' Mlissie insli' bookcase, glet her out qlick—dam qlick. You glet hurt, lit' Mlissie die. Ho-fang no can get—sabe?"

"Right."

"All-li. No can gette you till Chan-fu gone."

And, mysteriously as he had come, Ho-fang departed.

And then, if never before in his life Captain George Winsford did some speedy thinking. So *that* was the scratching—the strange tapping on glass! The girl was a prisoner in what would probably turn out to be some hellish invention of this scientific yellow swine. By God, but he'd want another invention before he was through—something that would save his carcass from the worst mauling he'd ever heard about—if not something worse.

He got up and, following a sudden line of ideas, picked the match-box from the table and began idly tossing it in

the air and catching it. Once, letting it drop, he got a quick squint at the automatic covering him.

"H'm," he muttered "not much doubt about your intentions."

Repeating his apparently inane amusement, he managed to catch the falling box upon his knuckles and drive it right across to the side of the open doors of the great Joss cabinet. Strolling after it, he stooped to pick it up, then suddenly, and from the side, sprang at the doors, slammed them to and bolted them from the outside. Two muffled shots sounded instantly from inside it.

He darted to the bookcase, feeling frantically about it to find some means of getting it open. The tapping inside was plainly audible to him now. Someone was inside it, beyond question! As Ho-fang had said, it would be the girl. Like a madman he tore at it, endeavoring with his one free hand to force it open.

Suddenly the voice of Chan-fu filled the room again.

"Winsford!"

"Well?"

"I cannot quite see you. Come into the centre of the room."

"'Will you come into my parlour!'" Winsford jeered.

"I have a bargain to make with you," Chan-fu went on.

Winsford, staring in desperation at the bookcase to which he could find no mode of ingress, bellowed back at him.

"Refused—whatever it is!"

"Do not be too hasty! You will never get the girl out of here without my consent!"

A tiny gold button carefully concealed in the front of the bookcase caught Winsford's eye. In an instant he had forced it. The front of the bookcase opened. Peering into

it he could see the white face of the girl staring at him. He saw also that she was upon the verge of collapse.

"Winsford," came the voice again, "Let me have the Star and you and the girl can go free. I swear it!"

"*You* swear!" the other jeered at him.

"Is—that—final?" came back to him in slow measured words.

"Absolutely," he shouted back. "And be damned to you."

A second later he saw something to turn his own face as white as that of the girl he had come to save. A bluish-white vapour was slowly filling the inside of the bookcase. Across the face behind the glass, he saw a look of agony pass—agony so terrible that the sight of it sent him blood-mad. He rushed to pick up a stool; then back, to scream through the window to her to keep as far away from the glass as was possible. Her face, he saw, was grey, not white. As he raised the stool he found he was shivering like a man in ague. "Can you hear me?" he screamed at her in a frenzy.

But it was the voice of Chan-fu that answered him.

"Perfectly. Do not break my toy. I can release her from where I am."

"Then do it quick or . . ." Winsford, half-sobbing, half-cursing raised the heavy stool. The door of the bookcase swung quietly open. Horrible noxious fumes met him as he rushed and dragged her out and up to that opening.

He dashed the curtains aside to stand appalled—stunned. Confronting him again was the blank unbroken wall of steel! He ground his teeth, then still carrying her rushed to that panelled door to find it as he had before, handleless, lockless—impassable.

He rested the girl against the front of that awful cabinet of death from which he had just taken her.

"Try to stand there for a moment," he urged. Desperately, half conscious she clung to it. "That's it. We'll beat the yellow fiend yet!"

Something took him suddenly in the throat—a burning choking sensation. He clutched at his collar—tore it off, but that gave him no relief. It was as though the very air of the room were turning to flame and he was breathing fire. He turned and tried to get back towards the girl—there were great balls of fire blazing before his eyes, but he could just see that she was sinking slowly to the ground; one thin, white hand fumbling feebly at her throat. She too! My God! She too!

She collapsed suddenly in a crumpled heap. Reeling, staggering, drawing great shuddering breaths as he went, he got to her, and half-carried, half dragged her to the centre of the floor; lurched and nearly went down over her. "Sorry," he whispered, from a burning, cracking throat. "I'm—all—in, Miss T'mala. All in." Clutching at nothing, he slipped to his knees. Such air as he could, by terrible sobbing gasps, draw into his lungs failed utterly to re-oxygenize them. He was choking—quickly suffocating. She, it looked from her white stillness, was gone! *Gone!* A paroxysm got him, clutched tearing at his throat. All that he could hear was the panting of his own racked chest—the thudding of his own heart. It was growing fainter—fainter . . .

There was some other sound. Vague . . . dimly . . . a long way off it sounded, still he could hear it . . . just catch . . . a voice of hideous mockery . . . the voice of the yellow man-devil, Chan-fu.

"You are in a lethal chamber," it said, a horrible gloating in its notes. "You are beaten, my friend," the cold, malignant voice croaked at him. "Any message? Any last word?"

One last great effort he made to get air to his lungs to answer. He dragged himself up upon his elbow. There was something else, he felt, fighting that his answer should not be heard. A strange, hissing, whining and burning, which seemed to come from the very walls, the floor—from everywhere. Without being shrill it penetrated—seemed to overwhelm every other sound.

Again that mocking voice repeated its question.

"Yes," he shouted with the last gasp of his bursting lungs. "Go—to—*hell!*"

Then crumpled in a huddled heap.

From the window a little later there came a strange, a weird sound, now rising insistently over that inner hum, now dropping in weird and mournful cadences—a song. An eerie and mournful chant which seemed to belong in that hissing charnel house with its two still figures: the Death Song of the Rivermen of the *Thao Song Cai*. The head of the little yellow man chanting it came through the window and peered down into the gaseous mist.

"You all-li?" he called; but no answer came back to him. Then, waiting a moment for the outward rush of poisonous gases, and with a wet cloth about his nostrils, he slipped through and dropped noiselessly to the ground.

CHAPTER XIX

CRISIS

FOR the twenty minutes after he had first clamped down that switch which shut all air from his diabolical Chinese room—save for the cunningly-concealed inlets through which filtered the gases which were to usurp its place—the activities of Chan-fu were many and varied. But he moved about them with the same stolid impassivity with which he performed every act of the ordinary daily routine of existence.

Near that chamber of death he had not been; there was no necessity—as he explained to the nerve-shaken Peroda who begged him to make sure that, this time, there could be no possible resurrection of the supposed to be dead.

“You may go if you like,” Chan-fu blandly and quite disinterestedly offered. “If you are tired of life, to open a door and admit air upon what has filled that room for the last ten minutes will perhaps be as good a way of quitting it as any other. Possibly not quite so painless as you might desire—but quite speedy. Five minutes, not more.”

And the Senhor had drawn back hurriedly, disassociating himself at once from any such suggestion. Truth to tell, it was the Senhor Peroda’s very love of life which was fast turning him from a more or less callous des-

perado into a man to whom every strange sound came as the crash of doom, and who jumped at every shadow. Benson was not alone in the undermining suspicion that things were not moving successfully; though, unlike the ex-bruiser, he had no particular aversion to the cold-blooded murder of a dozen, or a hundred for the matter of that, if it would put them upon that eminently to be desired footing of security!

But there was growing in him a horrible fear that two deaths had been accomplished—three, if one were to include Richard Winsford in the list of ultimate possible discoveries of foul play—and nothing accomplished by them. Moreover, this was a barbarous country where they hung not only the actual committer of a murder, but even all implicated in conniving to that end.

A distressing feeling was strengthening rapidly in the Portuguese half-breed, that in this England the power of Chan-fu to prevent punishment falling upon his underlings would be as *nil*. Whatever he might be, might do or cause to be done in that city up the Son-ka river, Señor Peroda was beginning to feel that in London they would hang Chan-fu himself as quickly as they would the poorest of his brethren in Limehouse Causeway. Which was, to put it mildly, a highly distressing and wholly disturbing thought; every recurrence of which made him shudder through the whole of his greasy being.

With something of this in his uneasy mind he sought out Chan-fu, to put forward, as delicately as might be, this side of the situation. But, with that grave impassivity and complete detachment which at most times he exhibited toward mundane affairs, he was told that Chan-fu was busy in his laboratory and not to be disturbed, ordered curtly to get out his big car and wait the master's

orders. Which, with the best grace he could summon up, he did; though, for quite some few minutes, he regained courage from the calm, entirely unperturbed manner of the Chinaman.

Getting out the high-powered car and slipping into his leathern motor suit, he sat in the drive of The Red House and mentally conned things over again. And as he did so, that personal courage of his, never the Señhor's strongest point at the best of times, receded slowly to the very lowest ebb.

He had strong and evil forebodings about the coming day; no brighter side he could conjure up seemed, even momentarily, to have power to dissipate his fears. If the Señhor had had his way—or been sufficiently courageous to brave the wrath of Chan-fu—he would have started his machine and driven it to the extreme end of this cursedly small island. But the memory of the Chinaman's face when he had turned upon him in the matter of that Joss of his, was sufficient to dispel any such idea of helter-skelter flight—that *and* the consequences when Chan-fu next laid that long, bony hand of his upon the shoulder of the fugitive. The prospect was by no means an entrancing one.

Benson, he supposed, had gone back to The Silent House in readiness for some further ransacking of that dismantled abode. That would, for certain, he supposed, be Chan-fu's next move. At least upon this occasion they would have the place to themselves without fear of interruption. He hoped so devoutly. At most there were but three hours if those bonds were to be found and negotiated—little enough time in all conscience—without further check.

But thoughts of The Silent House brought him sud-

denly on to another phase of the dismantled home of the late Richard Winsford, a peculiarly disturbing one at that. Ho-fang! Where *was* the wizened little yellow fiend through all this? According to Benson, he had scarcely been seen in those last few days since the reading of Richard Winsford's will. What was in his wily mind? What was he waiting for?

The Señor did not know; moreover, tense and worried speculation upon the probable motives of the Hanoi wharf-rat brought him no gleam of enlightenment; brought him nothing, indeed, but further intense disquietude. It was not in any way lessened by the certain knowledge that whoever Richard Winsford's faithful slave might or might not be personally inimical to—he most assuredly was to himself, Leon Peroda. And, most indisputably, Ho-fang had transferred his allegiance whole-heartedly to the dead man's heir—the man who was now dead himself.

The thought of two stiff and stark in that room shook him. Not for them—the Señor was as detached as to their end as could have been Chan-fu himself—but what would be the effect of the sudden disappearance upon Ho-fang?

Again there forced itself upon his memory that day ten years gone upon the verandah of the bungalow: it brought to him an involuntary shiver. And still yet another night later, after Winsford and his partner had gone up the river. The memory of *that* brought cold sweat to the Señor's forehead. He had been right at the very window of the room where Legarde's child slept when that yellow devil had hurled himself upon him out of the shadows. Only by the mercy of *el bueno Dios* had he escaped the dreaded hacking, disembowelling rip with Ho-fang's

gleaming, two-edged knife. *Por Dios!* but he had run that night; with all the devils of hell after him—or their equal. Only too well did he remember the silver streak which flashed, whistling, past his ear as he fled, ducking and dodging for the river. A knife as well thrown as he himself could have hurled it. Nothing but his wild swerving and dodging had saved him! A memory that to last a man a lifetime.

“And Mateo? If not Ho-fang, then who had killed Mateo? No white man—he was certain of that. Mateo had been strangled—a yellow man’s kill. And now they were going back to that house and Ho-fang still at large—waiting for somebody. Who? What? The situation was far, far from being to the *Señhor’s* liking.

Involuntarily he felt in his belt for his knife. It was not there! Slowly he turned that horrible, greenish-white which, in his countenance, denoted sheer, stark fear. *Dios mio!* Had he left it where it stuck in Winsford’s back last night? To be produced against him, perhaps, as unshakable evidence that it was *he* who had attempted the man’s life! If, when Winsford was discovered to be missing and a hue and cry raised, that weapon of his were to be produced! It . . . Never was the *Señhor Leon Peroda* nearer to starting up that car and flying for his life than at that moment. Perhaps nothing but the sudden appearance of Chan-fu stopped his hand moving furtively towards the gears, and most certainly what he saw upon the Chinaman’s face was enough to stay even the most foolhardy from anything that would arouse his anger.

He was dressed, the half-caste saw wonderingly, in tweeds and soft felt hat. Over his clothes he wore a heavy travelling-overcoat; in one hand he carried a small bag, in the other a suit-case which he handed up to Peroda.

Upon the road crossing the Common to The Silent House, he uttered not one syllable, but sat rigid, his stony, expressionless eyes staring before him. Not at all a propitious moment, the Señor decided, for any airing of the manifold doubts and fears which beset him.

As the powerful car swung slowly into the drive Chan-fu spoke for the first time.

"Hide the car in the shrubbery," he ordered curtly, then gave his whole attention to the house.

The blinds were drawn and, from the outside, no sign of life about the place was to be seen. The stillness was oppressive—to Peroda something more.

Arriving before the front door he, again on a curt order from Chan-fu, picked up that suit-case the Doctor had brought and, when at length Benson opened the door to them, carried it into the morning-room. Seen in the cold light of day, nothing even remotely like the condition of that room had ever before met the eyes of any of them. It might have been caught in a tornado. The carpet up, rugs in heaps everywhere, furniture tossed here and there, anywhere but where it belonged; what was left of it fit only for the scrap-heap. Anything more utterly desolate was impossible of conception—it looked as though it had been the scene of some wild, drunken orgy.

"And what the 'ell I'm t' do with it," wailed Benson, "Gawd on'y knows, for I don't."

"Get it straightened up as well as you can," Chan-fu ordered, "in case there should be some chance caller. Put that down there." He pointed to the suit-case Peroda was carrying, and indicated to the centre of the floor.

As Benson, mumbling and grumbling under his breath set about his Augean task, Chan-fu began to make several significant changes in his wardrobe. He divested himself

of his hat, overcoat, and the coat of the suit he was wearing, and in their place put on a Chinese skull-cap and a loose-sleeved Chinese coat. Prior to investing himself in the latter garment, he rolled the sleeves of his silk shirt high up his arms.

"Looks like we're goin' to 'ave a search picnic," Benson, eyeing this change dubiously, told himself with an inward groan. But he went on with his job without comment. Like Peroda, he was more than dispirited at the turn things were taking; and, unlike the half-caste, the spectre of that unfortunate white girl in that terrible sham book-case was preying heavily upon his mind. So much so that he dared not ask what had been the end. Never, not even upon that night when "Red" Mullarky had so catastrophically gone West had he felt in so shaken and despondent a condition.

It is possible that Chan-fu, with his uncanny power of reading the minds of other men, was aware of the growing pessimism of his two followers, for as he watched them his own manner changed entirely. From grave and preoccupied he became suddenly brisk, alert, and heartening. Supreme confidence exuded from the man.

"Anybody been here this morning yet, Benson?"

"Not that I know of. I've not so long got back from your place, Doctor. I waited the twenty minutes you told me to."

Chan-fu smiled encouragingly.

"A lot of things happened in that twenty minutes, Benson," he said. "For one thing, Captain Winsford called on me."

Bulging-eyed and with dropped, trembling jaws, the butler gazed at him aghast.

"What!" he managed to get out. "Then—then he wasn't dead after all!"

Chan-fu shook his head grimly.

"He was not. But I am afraid that he is now."

"You're—you're *sure* of it this time?" the other stammered nervously.

"Quite," Chan-fu assured him calmly. "Neither he nor the girl will ever trouble *us* again."

"Where are they?"

"In the Chinese Room, Benson. Suffocated by gas."

Benson stared at him, wild-eyed.

"But . . . won't that gas be dangerous to us when we go back?"

Slowly, very slowly, Chan-fu shook his head.

"It would be," he answered quietly. "Most unpleasantly so, if we *were* going back. But we are not. We have finished with The Red House, Benson. Our work there is done."

It took the big man a moment to grasp the significance of what the other was saying.

"But," he began, "if . . ."

"We shall leave the country within the next few hours," Chan-fu told him quickly.

"We?"

Chan-fu nodded.

"We three, Hwang, and my Joss," he said finally.

Chan-fu snapped together the bag into which had been placed the clothes he had changed from.

"Take that to the car," he ordered Peroda. "Stay by it until we come, or signal you from the window."

"But," Benson began again worriedly when the half-caste had gone, "if they go to The Red House, they'll

find the bodies of Winsford and the girl! That'll bring it right home to us!" Blind panic was very close to Benson at this moment. His eyes shifted about restlessly; in them the old look of the man who had expected every moment to be his last in freedom.

Watching him covertly, Chan-fu instantly re-assured him.

"By which time," he informed him, "my house will be non-existent. Before coming here I set an explosive machine with a time fuse. At the proper moment it will most effectually obliterate all traces of—of *everything*," he said significantly.

From Benson came a most unmistakable sigh of relief.

"What is the time?" Chan-fu asked.

Benson looked at his watch: "Five past nine."

"Less than three hours to do our work," Chan-fu commented.

The other eyed him askance.

"What are we going to do now?" he asked.

"We are going," replied Chan-fu with marked emphasis, "to find the Bonds and above everything, the Star!"

"What, *more* searching!" Benson's voice went dull from utter weariness.

"More searching—exactly," the Chinaman said inexorably.

Benson sank limply into a chair.

"If you can find an inch we ain't been over, I'll—I'll eat it!" he groaned despairingly.

"I have my own methods, Benson," Chan-fu told him quietly.

"We'll see how you'll get on with 'em," was the only thing the other could think of to say.

In front of the great fireplace, Chan-fu stood and pondered. Not one inch of it that those microscopic eyes of his did not subject to the most intense scrutiny.

"We will try the French method—reconstruction," he said presently. "We will begin at the finding of the body of Mateo."

His eyes fixed upon the carpet, he paced and repaced until he stood upon the exact spot at which the head of the dead man had struck the floor.

"Until the body was rolled over by Peroda," he proceeded, "it lay exactly here. As to how it got there we have positive knowledge. Most assuredly it was not carried into the room and laid there. No one, at that moment, could have passed in by either door or window without being seen. Most indubitably no one carrying the corpse of a man. That much we may take as absolute and proven fact."

He spoke in the calm, equable tone of a man who might be demonstrating an equation in Euclid. To Benson, watching him fascinatedly, it seemed as though he could actually *see* the man's brain working.

"The point is," he went on, "that it fell here; it fell from the upright to the prone position in one movement. I, for one, distinctly heard the thud. Now a dead body is a rigid object—a thing of dead weight with no more muscular resilience to deviate from the true than has a statue. It falls just as would a statue toppled over: in a dead line at true right angle to its upright position. That is proven fact. No *Quod erat demonstrandum* about that, Benson?"

For another few seconds he paused, running over the figure of the butler appraisingly.

"Besides being a much bigger man than Mateo," he observed, "you are considerably taller, but you'll do for an experiment. Lay here, perfectly rigid," he ordered, "in precisely the same position, and at the same angle as Mateo's body was found."

With Benson upon the floor, Chan-fu went again into silent calculation.

"Allowing for the difference in your height," he said at last. "The body fell from somewhere here, I fancy."

He stepped across the prone figure upon the floor and ran his hand lightly over the panelled part of the upper balustrade of the mantel. Suddenly a door in it swung open under his hand.

"Ah," he breathed, opening it to its widest extent. "You can get up, Benson. I think we have located what we are searching for. *Quod erat faciendum*," he quoted softly. "*Which was to be done.*"

With an utterly blank expression Benson got up and stared into the opening revealed by the door.

"Well, I'm—I'm jiggered!" he gasped in sheer amazement.

Chan-fu, a fierce exultance upon his lean face which even his unnatural impassivity could not keep repressed, smiled slowly at him.

"I thought you would be. You see what may be done by a reasoning thinker. You did not know this was here?"

"No."

"Or Captain Winsford?"

"I'm sure he didn't. I should 'ave 'eard if he'd found it."

"Then, obviously, you could not have searched it?"

"Of course we didn't."

"Good. We are getting nearer, Benson."

Into Benson's mind there flashed suddenly the solution of what for years had been an impenetrable mystery to him. He slapped one great fist into the other with a loud snap.

"I'll bet any money this is the way old Winsford used to get in and out of this room!" he cried.

"We are getting very much nearer," was Chan-fu's only response.

He took his hand from the door and at once it swung to and locked with a loud click. Turning to it again, he used every endeavour to re-open it, but without avail. Even Benson's huge, stubby, and tremendously powerful fingers could not force it open again.

"Well I be dam'd!" he ejaculated, scratching at his head in perplexity. But Chan-fu appeared in no way upset over the failure of their joint efforts.

"A nuisance," he admitted, "but we can force it. Find me something to use as a lever."

At which moment the front door bell rang out violently.

"Who is it?" hissed Chan-fu, his face gone suddenly set.

Benson slipped up to the window and endeavoured to get sight of the inopportune caller.

"Can't see from here," he sent an anxious whisper back.

Again the bell went; this time with greater violence than before.

"Better go to the door and see," Chan-fu advised after a second's thought. "Whoever it may be, don't let them waste our time," he warned, then slipped into a

door at his hand. Quickly Benson hurried out into the hall, mumbling and muttering as he went. As he did so, the gay, the *insouciant* Captain Philip Barty came briskly through the window. In his hand he carried a heavy suitcase and, by all external signs, the gallant Captain had come upon a visit of protracted duration.

CHAPTER XX

SUSPICIONS

THE Captain had been up bright and early upon this eventful morning; so much so that the unusual hour of seven found him in the bath of his Jermyn Street rooms, bawling at the top of his lungs and to the accompaniment of the cold water tap, a chaste selection from his vocal repertoire.

It was not altogether mere exuberance of spirits which drove him from his downy couch at this unearthly hour; truth to tell he had during the evening before given considerable thought to his friend Winsford, alone in that creepy abode of Bonds-to-Bearer—The Silent House.

However during the course of the evening, and in the company of an allurin' creature of the name of Genevieve (no relation, or even distant connection of the lady of the song, she assured him earnestly), his dubiousness in the matter of The Silent House and all its mysterious works gradually faded.

Upon his return home, and in solitary state over a whisky and soda, they returned upon him with redoubled force. Now, here was old Winnie by himself down in that twenty-roomed legacy of his, surrounded, so far as the eye could perceive, by nothing but trees, dicky-birds in same, and Chinamen. Oh, ah—and a poisonous-looking Peroda person; not to mention an out-sized Benson.

Certainly Winnie was a most competent two-fisted gentleman, and also Benson looked as though he could punch the bricks out of a wall without incommoding himself in the slightest degree. What Ho-fang's particular specialty was the Captain did not know, but he had no doubt that the small yellow bloke would be extra-cayenne with that piece of cutlery he was so endeared to.

But these other parties of the second part, the enemies of the coping-stoned Uncle Richard, seemed to have some unusual and stirrin' tricks up their sleeves; tricks not at all conducive to good health, and totally repugnant to the finer feelings.

This ladder and motor-car business Winnie spoke of, as an instance. *Non bon* that; entirely so. And the midnight marauding stuff. Running the rule over a man's crib at dead of night and when he had repaired to bed had not the true sporting touch at all. Looked at in any light, it was against all rules laid down for observance of the social amenities. S'posin' a bloke woke up and thought he heard someone messing about in his house. Steps out to take an observation and gets sniped off. A man couldn't be expected to go to bed with an arsenal handy in case of fire—not in Barnes, anyhow. Might be the thing to do on Broadway—according to the play of that name—but *Barnes!* Dammit, no—emphatically.

Yet there it was! Winnie was no soft laddie-buck to get the breeze up on shadowy suspicions. He did something more than *think* there were things not so good around and about him. Anyhow, you don't *think* twenty-foot ladders—or racing motors beetlin' at you full speed. Not so. And you couldn't have thought Uncle's coping-stone away if you shut yourself up in a monastery and gave your whole life up to the job.

By which time Captain Barty had very nearly self-communed himself into the condition of getting into his day attire, invoking by 'phone the old flying-birdcage from its nest in the garage and doing the trip to Barnes in even time. But as the clock then stood at half past three, he decided that the hour was entirely unpropitious. Any funny business that might be toward would most certainly be over by the time he could beetle in—no matter how fast he sent his brand-new Juggernaut over the course. But in the morning bright and early; seven—no, six-thirty.

In his kitchen he found an alarum-clock set by his man for the civilized hour of nine A. M. Grimly he wound the alarum key to produce the possible maximum of uproar, and set the dial at six-thirty. Then he retired to bed.

Punctually to the second—being, as you might say, a disciplined clock—having been won by the Captain at a shooting range run by an old sweat—the time-pieced off with so appalling a din that Captain Barty needed not the kindly offices of his man to arouse him; nor, incidentally, did any person resident in Jermyn Street within the radius of one hundred yards north, south, east or west of his apartments. As for his man, he was still wandering about in a bedazed condition when the Captain, having bathed, shaved and bedecked himself in his latest Autumn-suiting, was trundling the old six-cylinder on the road to Mandalay via Piccadilly, Brompton Road, the Fulham Road, Putney Bridge, and so on and so forth in their proper geographical order.

He had a slight check at Hyde Park Corner, where an indignant taximan accused the Captain before the officer on point of trying to ram him and his machine through

the wall of St. George's Hospital. An absurd charge which, before the soft answer and a pretty bit of sleight of hand with a half-crown, melted into thin air. The officer turned his Nelson eye upon the narrowly-averted catastrophe and majestically waved the Captain on into the far beyond towards Knightsbridge.

A similar experience at the turn into the lower Richmond Road—this time with a milkman pushing a hand cart loaded with his juicy wares—proved to be one not quite so deftly handled. The blue-clad gent on point had apparently never heard of Nelson's blind eye, he went stone deaf in the ear which should have received the cajoling word, and as for the sleight of hand with the half-crown, Devant himself couldn't have made him see it. He wrote the Captain's name, address and number in his little book with a little pencil and observed: "You'll hear more of this," in a cold, austere voice which boded no good whatever.

However, the gentleman addressed received the pronouncement philosophically. If a man, he told himself, was going to drive a rip-snorting jigger of this kind, the quicker he got himself hardened to having his name, address and identification marks written down in little black books with little bits of pencil, so much the easier would life become. Wishing the officer and the semi-demented owner of the fractured milk bottles an entirely ironical "Good morning," he set off again along the Lower Richmond Road, but this time at the exceedingly moderate speed of thirty m. p. h.; a respectable rate of progress which invariably gave him the pip. On the Mill Hill road across Barnes Common, however, he tickled her up to a sweet, soundless sixty-five, after which he felt much better.

Arrived before the gate to the drive of The Silent House he found, to his astonishment, that it was open—a most unusual thing from what he had heard of the routine of things. Someone, either last night or this morning early, had called upon Winnie and neglected to shut it after them.

For some reason or other—the “why” of which was entirely beyond him save that he had a “hunch,” as the Americans put it, not to do so—he suddenly determined not to run his car up to the front of the house, but steer it into a side-path, heavily hedged and overhung with laurels run wild. Had anyone asked the Captain what was back of his mind in following the unusual procedure he could no more have given a reasonable and coherent answer than he could have performed the trepanning operation upon a mad bull. Suffice it that he did so: he had the “hunch” to do it and that was all.

Taking his suit-case from the car, he approached the front door on foot, performed his usual *tallentando* upon the door bell, waited one half minute (which in his matured opinion was all any person could be reasonably expected to wait for anything in this world), saw the garden window open and decided to make entrance thereby. Passing through, he involuntarily glanced up, then dived headlong into the room as though someone had fired a volley at him from ambush.

“I may be of no particular use in the scheme of things,” he told himself, “but, damme if I’m going to be passed onward by a coping-stone.”

He found the room empty and called attention to his presence there in his usual vociferous manner.

“Shop!” he bawled, to be at length rewarded by the gargoye head of Benson, gazing at him through the

curtained entrance to the hall in undiluted astonishment. *And* something else, as the keen eyes of the Captain were quick to note. If Benson were not the most utterly flabbergasted and unstuck man in Barnes at seeing him there, then he was no judge of flabbergasted and unstuck humanity. But he did not permit the thought to show upon his remarkably debonair features.

"Hello—'ello, my merry heavyweight," he hailed exuberantly, "and how's things?"

To which Benson, in a slow, shaken voice responded:

"Good morning, sir. Was—was it you what rung?"

Captain Barty regarded him severely.

"No," he corrected chasteningly, "it was me which ringéd. Then contradicted himself flatly. "Yes. And waited a devil of a time on the doorstep. Also, nad to risk my life again."

Benson stared at him vacantly.

"Life, sir? How's that, sir?" He came gingerly into the room.

"Had to come through that bally window. Frightfully dangerous." Benson still gaped at him in total loss. "Coping-stones, you ass, coping-stones!"

A sickly, most unmirthful smile flickered uncertainly upon the butler's lips, but his eyes were not smiling, Barty saw.

"Oh. . . . I see, sir," he responded feebly.

In his most careless, easy-going manner Barty glanced about the room, then gave the butler his undivided attention.

"Had an earthquake here?" he inquired mildly.

"We—er—we've had a busy time here, sir," Benson's voice sounded strangely uneasy.

"H'm." The Captain took his monocle from his eye,

wiped it, then screwed it firmly back in its place. His stare at the other became unpleasantly pointed enough to make the butler's eyes narrow.

"There's something wrong with you this morning, Benson," he said with most unusual sharpness.

Benson gave a palpable start and did not at once regain control of himself.

"No, sir," he replied flurriedly, "I'm all right."

"But you're not all right," Barty demurred. "Decidedly not."

Benson flashed out upon him with an open snarl.

"What d'ye mean?" he demanded.

Captain Barty positively beamed upon him.

"Aha!" he cried chidingly, "there you are. Peevishness—sudden unreasonable truculence—aggressive movement! All proves that what I say is correct. You are *not* right, Benson! And there is something sweetly and beautifully wrong *somewhere!*" he added to himself inwardly.

He moved leisurely about, his eyes slipping into every corner of the room, missing nothing of its upheaval, then planted himself back to the fireplace. Although not appearing to take any notice of Benson, he was perfectly well aware that that worthy was eyeing him like a cat—and a deuced nervous cat at that. He took a cigarette from his case and tapped it thoughtfully against the mantelpiece.

"Where's Captain Winsford?" he shot suddenly over his shoulder. He counted precisely ten before Benson found an answer to his most ordinary question, and at that a staggered, tongue-tied answer.

"He—he went out—early this morning, sir."

It not suiting the Captain to notice the shakiness of the reply he got, he went on equably.

"Has he found those thingummies—the bonds?"

Five, Barty mentally counted before this was replied to—Benson was steadying up a bit. And the answer was too palpably a brain wave. Barty's lips compressed.

"Yes, sir," Benson told him gleefully. "He—he found 'em last night, sir."

The Captain responded with equal glee—much better assumed.

"Good egg!" he exclaimed exultantly.

"Yes. I—I think he's gone up to London," Benson volunteered. "To see about cashing 'em, sir."

"*That's* all right then!" It was obvious that Captain Barty was a thoroughly pleased and satisfied man. The better to register this pleasant condition of mind, he not only hummed a few bars of an exceedingly catchy Charleston, but even executed a few steps of that popular dance with marked success.

"I—I suppose," Benson ventured tentatively, a whole world of craftiness in his voice, "I suppose you'll go up after him, sir?"

"Well," Captain Barty rubbed his velvet-smooth chin reflectively, "I suppose I ought."

There was slightly more confidence in Benson's voice as he backed this opinion solidly.

"I think it would be better, sir," he said. "Can't do any good here, sir."

The Captain appeared to give the suggestion a moment's further consideration.

"Jolly good idea, Benson," he agreed brightly. "Right ho—I'll pop off."

The sudden relief which appeared in Benson's eyes was not to be mistaken. "Oh! Did he mention where he might be found?"

The answer to *this* came readily enough, the Captain noticed. Eagerly in fact. "Yes, sir. At his flat, sir."

"Good enough," dissembled Barty cheerfully. "Oh, by the way, where shall I be placing the innocent nut to-night? Where is the shut-eye emporium?"

Benson stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"Your education," remarked Captain Barty severely, "is not what it should be. In plain words, where shall I sleep to-night?"

"Oh!" Again Benson dragged his face into that hollow smile. "I expect it will be the room next to the Captain's, sir." He pointed to the staircase. "The second door on the right, sir."

"I'll just pop and have a mike at it," returned Captain Barty in the true Oxford manner.

He picked up stick and gloves and, humming gaily, proceeded up the staircase and out of sight. From the butler there came one long, heavy sigh of relaxation. This altogether unlooked-for interview had been a tense strain on him. However, he assured himself, he'd bluffed this eye-glassed dude out of the place and that was all that mattered. Though—come to think of it—his coming back there that night wasn't any too good from their standpoint. If he did not succeed in picking up Winsford in Town, then returned, still to find no trace of him . . . what? He'd perhaps raise a shout quicker than suited their book. Before they could . . . It was an again panicky man whom Chan-fu started out of a brown, an exceedingly dark-brown, study.

"That fool, eh?" he said curtly.

"Yes. He's—he's going in a minute."

"He had better. We haven't many to waste."

"But, Doctor," Benson put to him anxiously, "supposing when he can't find Winsford he comes straight back here and—and begins to *suspect* things?"

"Get him out of here, now," Chan-fu ordered. "Leave the rest of it to me."

"All right. You know what you're doing. Get back a minute—I'll get shut of him."

Upstairs, Captain Barty, after giving the most cursory of glances to the room he was to occupy, closed the door and stood still, doing some remarkably heady thinking.

Not a doubt that something was devilishly wrong in this house; and, moreover, that the man Benson was in on the wrong side of it—whatever "it" might prove to be. He had been knocked edgeways at the Captain's appearance, and was lying like a trooper—if troopers really were the proverbial liars they were credited with being—to cover up something. He stole on tiptoe to the next room, Winsford's. The bed had not been touched—pyjamas neatly folded by the pillow; not the smallest indication that the room had ever been occupied last night.

Now what did that mean? Had Winsford, alone there, been called out by some cock-and-bull yarn into a trap? He stiffened. Old man Winsford had said plainly enough that these enemies of his would stop at nothing—not even murder. Had Winnie been lured out—perhaps only into that garden and . . . and had not come back, of course! And Benson was in it—one of the gang—and was trying to draw a herring across the missing man's trail. The Captain straightened himself up determinedly: a very ugly expression crept into his good-looking face. By God, if murder was the tune these swine were calling,

somebody would pay the piper's bill—and before they were so much older.

A few moments later, his hands stuffed deep in his pockets and minus any of his impedimenta, he strolled down the staircase again, a monument of care-free felicity. But as he descended, his eyes were covertly taking in all that he could see of the room below. This was the result of no search of Winnie's, he was certain. Somebody had been playing merry hell there—and not so long ago that Benson had had time to disguise the fact a bit. With a leisurely calm, well-nigh maddening to the man anxiously watching him, he crossed the floor towards what remained of the settee.

"Your room all right, sir?" Benson inquired.

"Top hole. Top hole," the Captain responded most affably. Then suddenly cast himself upon the wrecked settee with every appearance of taking as comfortable a rest as circumstances would permit. "Anybody call after I left last night?" he asked casually.

"No one, sir," Benson answered quickly—too quickly to be quite true, his listener considered. Particularly in the face of some evidence which had in some way got tucked into the settee joints and was staring him in the face.

"What the deuce is this?" he inquired picking that article up.

"Looks—looks like a woman's hanky, sir," Benson stammered, his eyes fixed upon the filmy bit of lace.

"My dear Watson," murmured Sherlock, 'it is.' " Barty quoted softly. "Did the Captain have a lady visitor here last night?" he questioned.

Benson's face stiffened at once.

"Well, sir," he began after a moment's hesitation. "I—"

"Touching picture of the faithful old retainer refusing to besmirch the honour of his lord," commented the Captain with true dramatic force.

Benson blinked irritably.

"Don't you think you'd better go, sir?" he suggested, with just a trifle *too* much anxiety in his voice.

"Plenty of time, old son," the Captain assured him, rising and cruising with apparent aimlessness about the room. "Er—touching this hanky—when did she arrive?"

With a muttered oath under his breath and a murderous glance at the Captain's back, Benson evaded the question.

"I think you'd better ask the Captain about that, sir," he said stiffly. "And, anyhow, if you *are* going up, sir, it's pretty late."

"Plenty of time, Benson, plenty of time," the Captain again assured him, then with his foot turned over the shattered flower bowl. With his head cocked to one side he studied it attentively.

"That stood on there, didn't it?" he inquired, pointing at the exact spot upon the sideboard which the bowl in its pristine condition had graced.

There was something decidedly uncomfortable in Benson's voice when he answered. Barty turned carelessly to catch sight of the man's face. In it there was a look of guilty furtiveness which suggested at once to him that this smashed object, could it speak, could unfold a tale of tremendous interest.

"In the rummaging around looking for the bonds," Benson informed him hastily and quite gratuitously, "Captain Winsford knocked it over himself, sir."

"*Did* he now?" returned Captain Barty in a tone which

might have meant anything—or nothing. His face was as noncommittal as his words, for he saw that the big man was watching him closely. "Well," he remarked jocularly, "they say 'break one, you break three'; I wonder," he concluded musingly, "what the next will turn out to be?"

An enquiry which Benson made no attempt to answer. But everywhere that the Captain's eye turned, those of the butler followed them insistently. Which was the reason why, beyond the first swift glance at something which for a moment almost took his breath away, he sedulously kept his eyes from one particular spot upon the wall.

There were many subjects in this world upon which Captain Bart, though by no means lacking in a certain hard-boiled *ego*, would not have pronounced himself to be an infallible authority. There were many things upon which he would frankly have admitted himself an out-and-out duffer. But after the experiences which thronged those four years of life between the years nineteen-fourteen and nineteen-eighteen, there was one particular subject upon which he could speak straight from the book. He knew a bullet hole when he saw one, and if that vase had not been shattered by a bullet from a .44 calibre revolver, which said missile was now neatly plugged into the wall just behind where the vase had stood, then he, Captain Philip Bart, ex R.A.F., was in the public safety, unfit to be at large. Bullets had been flying about in this room last night and . . . and where the *hell* had George Winsford disappeared to?

CHAPTER XXI

FACTS

THE Captain, having made up his mind with absolute certitude upon the touchy matter of bullets, promptly commenced a Machiavellian dissembling. During many weeks in hospital, he had nourished his mind upon considerable numbers of the most lurid novels dealing with crime and the criminal, procurable. In his opinion he had a very fair idea of the modern scientific processes of prevention and detection of crime. Very fair indeed—considering.

The first move upon the part of the detective-person, amateur or professional as it might happen, was unquestionably to—er—well, to dissemble. To pretend to be interested in that which he was not, and to all intents and purposes remain completely indifferent to that which he was grinding his back teeth to powder to hear. To trick the opposition into damaging statements of some kind or other—if you follow the idea.

Hence, taking not the slightest notice of that tell-tale hole in the plaster, Captain Barty dissembled to Benson in his very best manner.

Again he proceeded to mooch about the room, chanting softly a bright little vocal confection which ran:

“Oh, Mamie, don’t play me
For a juicy sap.”

"You don't know what a 'sap' is, Benson, I suppose?" he inquired pleasantly.

"No, sir," replied that disgruntled worthy tersely.

"No, you wouldn't. Don't speak the American tongue, do you?"

"No, sir," Benson said again in exactly the same tone.

"Great pity," the Captain deplored. "Very necessary now-a-days. If you were a theatregoer, for instance, Benson, and went to see a play in London—you wouldn't know what anything was all about if you haven't studied the American language."

"I don't go to the-atres," Benson stated in a most uncordial voice.

Captain Barty waved an airy hand.

"No? Well, p'raps you're wise. Shockin' slush in most of 'em. But if you had, you'd have been *au fait* when I asked what a 'sap' was." Nothing forthcoming but a grunt from the gentleman he was enlightening, he proceeded still further with his education.

"A 'sap,' Benson," he informed him explicitly, "is that kind of a dam'd fool who thinks everybody is a dam'd fool except himself. As a matter of actual fact he's generally the 'come-on'—the goat—for someone wiser than himself. That's what a 'sap' is."

Whether there was anything in the tone in which Captain Barty presented this interesting information to his surly listener cannot be said; but most certainly the deep-set eyes under their craggy frontal bones flashed upon him a sudden look in which annoyance was almost equally blended with quick, cunning thought. The Captain took no apparent notice of it, he knew that he had Benson guessing—and not happily.

"Of course," he proceeded as though delivering a

lecturette, "there are 'saps' and 'saps.' You quite understand, Benson, the American 'sap' has no connection with *verb-sap* which is short for *Verbum sat sapienti* and means: 'A word is enough for a wise man,' which is all the Latin I can remember. That again is rendered in the pure and beautiful American tongue as: 'A kick in the slats tells no lies.' However, to return to another and perhaps more pleasing variety of 'saps.' What are the local girls like?"

"You're wasting time, sir," Benson said in a low, repressed voice.

"On the contrary," Captain Barty assured him feelingly, "I am gaining time, old thing. Gaining tremendously. Don't you see?"

"No, sir." The words sounded just as though the butler had bitten them off and spat them at him.

Captain Barty rather wearily explained.

"I ask you what the girls are like, locally. Suppose you said: 'Nanty,' or perhaps 'Napoo,' or, having lived lately in the West End and become Americanized, advised me tritely to 'Can the local wenies,' or 'Park well away from the Main Street janes,' I should know at once that destiny had other female society stored up for me and not waste my valuable time on them. See?"

A malevolent grunt answered this pertinent query.

"And that reminds me," Barty moved towards the 'phone, "I must call up one of my fiancées."

Quickly Benson intercepted him.

"'Phone's out of order, sir," he said sourly.

"That's no good then." The Captain picked up his hat, adjusted it to the correct angle favoured by the younger and more sporting members of the Bath Club,

then strolled towards the window. "Right ho! I'll pop off. Bye-bye!"

From the window Benson watched him until he turned a bend of the drive, then hurled a hearty curse after him and came quickly to the door of the room in which Chan-fu waited.

"Doctor," he called urgently, "it's all right—he's gone at last. Damn him!"

"Did he say where he was going?" Chan-fu asked, suddenly thoughtful.

Benson grimaced nervously.

"I sent him to Winsford's flat in London," he answered uncertainly.

"It doesn't matter where, as long as he has no time to get back here before we've finished," Chan-fu said. He went again to the mantel upright in which the secret door had been discovered.

"We must get this open somehow," he said sharply.

"I'll get a crow-bar from the tool-shed," Benson volunteered.

"Hurry."

A succession of quick, short rings came at the front-door bell; the rings of a person of great nervous energy who had little time to spare.

Again a savage oath burst from Benson's lips. Chan-fu stood rigid. He did not speak, but the expression upon his face might easily have persuaded the ringer to change his project of calling had he seen it.

"What'll I do?" Benson whispered hoarsely.

"See who it is," Chan-fu ordered. "But get rid of them without delay. I'll go back and wait."

Benson went stealthily into the hall, straightening his clothes as he went.

Captain Barty, once out of sight of the window from which he was perfectly well aware that Benson watched him, dashed suddenly into a large clump of evergreens and set himself to think over the events of this most unpromising morning. By no stretch of the imagination could they be called good. The portents, as far as he could put them together, were dark, dank, and dam'd sinister.

From where he stood, he studied the gravelled drive attentively. Nobody had been—according to Benson. But there upon the drive were certain marks which, beyond question, gave that engaging person the lie direct. Someone *had* been. Moreover that someone came in a car. And again in a car of considerable dimensions, by the width between the tyre tracks. Again, those tracks themselves told their story to the experienced eye. Not a doubt in Barty's mind that by the impressions, the tyres were such as would be used upon a racing car of tremendously high power. And furthermore those tracks had not been made so very long since. The moisture of the fog in the gravel had kept them together as plainly as a plaster of Paris mould.

Racing-car? Now who did Winnie know who possessed a high-powered racing-car? An intense racking of Captain Barty's memory failed to recall any such desirable person amongst Captain Winsford's circle of friends. Then something hit him with a sudden jolt. Peroda!—and the car which had made for old Winnie the moment he set hoof out of the gate! The one he had been obliged to hop the ditch to escape from. Peroda, begad! That dirty oleaginous scum—if that was the word that covered a greasy hound like that. Now what game had brought him here last night or—Barty examined the tracks again

—or early this morning? And he'd gone in a hell of a hurry; too much so to close the gate. *And bullets had been flying around!* Captain Philip Barty's jaw shut down like a steel rat trap.

He was giving those tyre impressions a further looking over when the sound of a brisk, business-like step advancing up the drive fell upon his ears. Ducking quickly behind his evergreen curtain, he waited to see who the newcomer might be. To his amazement it proved to be no other than that pillar of the legal world, Mr. Herrington, of Herrington and Roe. What the blazes was *he* doing here?

His first impulse was to hail the solicitor before he could be seen from the house, draw him into the seclusion of his present hiding place, and have a very serious heart-to-heart talk with him of the suspicions which were rapidly becoming concrete certainties as to what had recently happened in this ill-fated Silent House. Knock out of his head, for good and all, that his client, the deceased Winsford, was in any way mentally unsound when he had left that warning letter to his nephew and heir. In fact, take it bye and large, and in and out and all around, give the legal gentleman possibly the biggest shock he had ever sustained in the whole course of his professional career.

But, as that gentleman bustled past him, a dapper figure in grey and carrying his inevitable bag, making for the hall door, he decided against any such hasty action. Benson had told him, Barty, one tale—and one darned fishy yarn it was. Let him tell Herrington another: the probability was that it would differ in some material point and they would have him. Give Benson sufficient rope, the Captain considered, that exceedingly dubious person

would most assuredly hang himself. Anyhow, that he could think of at the moment, no finer person could there be to bring matters to that highly desirable end than the old Herry—once he'd got the mulish servitor tied up into verbal knots.

He gave the legal luminary plenty of time to make the hall door—indeed, listened to his succession of short, imperative rings, then followed on, taking especial care that his re-entrance to that slightly dishevelled morning-room would be something in the nature of a knock-out—at any rate in so far as Benson was concerned. Making a detour, he manœuvred himself into a sound strategic position beside the window, where—the direct antithesis of the good little boy of polite fable—he could hear and not be seen. The expression upon Benson's face as he followed Herrington into the room brought great joy to the Captain's soul.

"Captain Winsford up yet?" began the legal gentleman, depositing his bag with a business-like bump upon the table.

"Up!" Benson's wits were badly scattered. "Yes, sir; oh yes. He's gone up to London."

"London!"

Frank amazement appeared in Mr. Herrington's bright alert eyes. Over his *pince-nez* he fixed his informant with a particularly penetrating look.

"Did he leave no message for me?" he asked perplexedly.

"He said he was going to your office, sir," Benson told him hurriedly.

At which additional information Mr. Herrington seemed even more non-plussed than before.

"Funny," he said. "He sent me no word of coming up. If he had I shouldn't have been here."

"He said he would be waiting in your office, sir," the butler assured him.

"You *lying* hound!" breathed the inward voice of the unseen witness of this conversation. "You dam'd lying tyke! Before I'm . . ."

That inward voice ceased its objurgation on a sharp, whistling indrawn breath. Upon the floor just inside the window, almost hidden by the folds of the curtain, the eyes of Captain Barty fell upon an object which, momentarily, knocked all other thoughts clear out of his head. It was a large, broad-bladed dagger, of which both blade and handle were thickly besmeared with congealed blood! Some moments he stared amazedly upon the horrifying sight, wondering what under the skies the ugly discovery portended.

Bullets were bad enough in all conscience, but this . . . ! Of one thing, as close an examination as was possible left him certain: the grisly weapon upon the floor was not the one Ho-fang had suggested his implacable intention of carving up George Winsford's enemies with. Not a similar knife in any shape or form. That, too, had been broad but with a curve to the blade—an unpleasantly suggestive curve. This one was straight, and with an Eastern kind of wave along the blade. But he did not attempt to pick it up. It was safe enough where it was for the present. But his face was exceedingly serious as he again picked up the thread of conversation going on inside.

"Oh, well," Herrington was saying, not without a certain annoyance, "I'll get back to Town then. It's a nui-

sance—there's not very much time! Can't think what would have taken him up to see me though." There was a certain hesitation in his tone.

At once Benson glibly supplied the key.

"He—he's found the Bonds, sir," he said quickly.

Instant relief appeared upon the features of the legal man.

"Aha!" he ejaculated. "*That's* all right then. That's really what I was bothering about. In that case, I'd better get back without delay. Good-bye."

He had picked up his bag and was moving with his usual rapidity of manner towards the hall, when Captain Barty, the personification of all that was gay and care-free, strolled in through the window. One glimpse out of the corner of his eye he permitted himself at Benson, then addressed himself wholly and exuberantly to the solicitor. But in that glimpse he saw something in the butler's face which would have made a less indomitable man look well to himself.

"Hello—'ello, Herry, old thing!" he greeted ecstatically.

Mr. Herrington considerably taken aback by this apparition of sartorial and other perfection, stared a moment, then retraced his steps, took the hand extended to him and shook it cordially. After all, if George Winsford liked to have a congenital idiot as his inseparable companion, that, most irrefragably, was *his* affair. There was no law that said he shouldn't—that Herrington, of Herrington and Roe had ever heard about at any rate. And any laws *he* had not heard about were not worth giving a moment's consideration to.

"Bless my soul," he ejaculated. "And how is Captain Barty?"

"In the absolute, bally pink. And you?"

"Fine, thanks."

"Just blown in from Town?" Captain Barty inquired in his most casual—and mendacious—manner.

"Yes." Mr. Herrington made a slight grimace. "And now I've got to blow back again. A wasted trip—and there's not much time left." He glanced at his watch, then shut it with a snap.

"If you care to wait a second or two I'll come with you," Captain Barty generously offered.

"Delighted—delighted!"

The Captain looked at the sullen-looking man standing silently watching and listening with all his ears.

"By the way, Benson, take that bag to my room, will you?"

"I'll see to it as soon as you've gone, sir," came the short answer.

The Captain shook his head.

"Better take it now," he insisted. "Might slip the old noddle, you know."

It was a full instant before Benson, battling with something in his mind, picked up the suit-case and moved reluctantly towards the stairs. Herrington, about to speak, caught a sudden glance from Barty and checked himself—greatly wondering. Not until the servant had passed completely out of sight did the other begin—and then in a low, carefully-guarded voice:

"Where was Winsford supposed to see you in Town?" he demanded.

"He left a message with Benson that he would be waiting for me in my office," Herrington answered in some surprise.

"Did he? Herry," Barty said grimly, "there's something radically wrong here."

Mr. Herrington turned startled eyes upon him.

"Eh? How's that?"

"Did Benson seem damnably anxious to get rid of you?"

The other considered a moment.

"Well, come to think of it, he certainly did."

"Tells you Winnie is at your office, and *me* that he is at his old flat." He slipped up to the window, stooped, picked up the knife and exhibited it. Herrington stared at the gruesome-looking object in dismay.

"This doesn't look very pleasant or promising, does it?" Barty questioned, tight-lipped.

"God bless my soul!" ejaculated the lawyer. He examined the knife through his glasses. "It's—it's a little rusty, isn't it?"

"That's not rust, Herry," Captain Barty informed him quietly. "That's blood—congealed blood. And not dried on so long either. Damn bad staff-work leavin' it about, y'know."

"Blood!"

"Yes."

Down the stairs Benson came again, his eyes, quick and suspicious, upon the two men beneath him. Unseen, Barty dropped his find into his coat pocket.

"Oh, Benson, dear old pip, awfully sorry and all that, but you might get my gloves for me."

Beyond a deep breath the butler made no sign, but Barty, watching him, caught a gleam in his eyes that told beyond question of just what was in his mind.

As he disappeared up the stairway again, Captain

Barty crossed the room quickly and pointed to that bullet hole in the wall. He beckoned Herrington to him.

"What do you make of that?" he asked in a whisper.

"It *looks* like a bullet hole," the other said, mystified.

"Bull's-eye again," Barty confirmed; then went on in the same whisper: "I looked into Winnie's room just now. He didn't sleep there last night—and Benson knows it."

"But surely," the solicitor gasped, "surely Benson is to be trusted?"

"Not as far as you could throw him. He's lying to us. Ssh!"

Down the stairs the servant came again, this time rapidly. He handed Barty his gloves and moved scowlingly towards the hall. His manner left little doubt that the movement was an unspoken invitation to go.

"Thanks, dear child," Captain Barty sent after him. "Just off now. Well," he stated positively, "if I'm not the world's greatest ass! My stick! My dear old feller, I'll have to trouble you again. I've forgotten all about my bally stick. I should have thought of it, really! A million apologies, Benson, but—you might bring it down for me."

There was no mistaking the vicious curse the big man spat as he, for the third time, made for the staircase. Captain Barty, however, chose to ignore it completely. He went to the telephone, picked it up and exhibited it to the dumbfounded solicitor.

"Cut," he said tersely. "And Benson knew it. Stopped me from using it. Put me off with a tale that it was out of order. No; there's no trusting that gentleman. Whatever's happened, he's in the thick of it."

"What has happened, do you think?" Herrington asked anxiously.

"I'm afraid the other side have got hold of Winnie. Anyway I'm going to try and find out. Will you pop to the police station and bring back a couple of bobbies with you. Though a legal bird like you ought to be good for a Superintendent and a couple of Inspectors at least!"

Herrington, now thoroughly alarmed, nodded quickly.

"Certainly. And you?"

The Captain's forehead puckered thoughtfully.

"A girl called on Winnie last night," he whispered. "I may be wrong, but I think she works for the other side. I'm going to try and find her. I've a pretty sound idea that when I do, Winnie won't be so far off."

Again the staircase creaked under Benson's heavy, but wonderfully quick tread. Without a word he offered Barty his stick and turned away.

"My thanks, little one," returned the recipient, the soul of amiability. "Come on, Herry." He started for the hall, Herrington bustling after him. But at the entrance he stopped again when the solicitor had passed him, and leaned carelessly against the lintel.

"By the way," he asked suddenly, "where did that lady who called last night come from?"

Benson, taken off his guard, got as far as "The Red . . ." then checked himself.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said evenly. "I don't remember."

"Pity," Barty observed ironically. "The Red House—that's that Chinese doctor's place—Doctor Chan-fu. Right ho!" Again he made a move to follow the waiting Herrington.

"Which is the nearest police-station?" he shot swiftly. Benson stared at him blankly.

"King—Kingston, sir," he faltered slowly.

"Take long to get there?"

"A—about a quarter of an hour, sir." The words came automatically, as though the man uttering them had no power over his tongue.

"Right." Into Captain Barty's voice there came a sharp, incisive snap. "We're going there. If Captain Winsford should, by any unforeseen chance, come back while we're away, say that we will return in about half an hour, will you?"

But no response came from Joseph Benson. The door slammed upon a man who looked as though he had been suddenly turned to stone—save that the muscles of his big, heavy face had sagged, and now twitched incessantly. By the stunned expression of his eyes, and the ghastly grey colour his face had gone, he might have been dead standing up, but that the fingers of his huge hands kept fumbling about with the lapels of his coat.

"Police," he got at last out of a paralyzed throat. "After all these years, they'll get me—at the finish."

Then suddenly he started around as though in quick, desperate resolve.

CHAPTER XXII

THE CUP AND THE LIP

THAT the man upon whose shoulder his hand closed, with a firm, detaining grip was in the last stage of panic-stricken fear, Chan-fu did not need more than one glance to satisfy himself. If ever terror, fear of the law, showed in a man's eyes, it did at that moment in Benson's. From somewhere he had grabbed at a cap, hastily flung down upon his return from The Red House, and little doubt but that another few minutes would have seen him putting as great a distance between himself and The Silent House on Barnes Common as it was humanly possible for him to do.

At the clasp of Chan-fu's hand upon his shoulder, a great start had gone right through the man; for an instant it came upon him that the long evaded Nemesis had overtaken him at last. The face that jerked around upon the Chinaman was livid and beaded with sweat.

"Well, Benson?" Chan-fu asked quietly.

"You—you heard what 'e—what 'e said?" he gasped. Chan-fu nodded slowly.

"About the police? Oh yes," he replied impassively.

Benson took one staggered look at him and then pulled on his cap.

"Doctor," he said hoarsely. "We're going to lose this game. And I ain't stayin' to see the finish." He shook the other man's hand off and went quickly up to the garden

window. Chan-fu, his attention again upon the panelled door, did not appear to be taking a great deal of notice of him. At the window Benson stood fidgeting, eaten with nervous dread.

"Going, eh?" Chan-fu asked in a most casual, indeed, disinterested voice.

The big man gave one quick look back at him.

"Yus," he said, "an' about time too."

Slowly, very slowly Chan-fu shook his head.

"You had better stay here, Benson," he returned with persuasive softness.

"And be nabbed by the police," the other cried vehemently. "Not me!"

Long and penetratingly Chan-fu's eyes searched him. Into them came that stony, pitiless look the butler knew so well.

"If you go now, Benson," he said quietly, "I may tell the police where to find you. I might also give them some quite unexpected information concerning you. Something that would undoubtedly give them a very considerable, and pleasant, surprise."

The other stared back at him dully. Slowly a red flush crept over the bull-neck and up into the big, broken-featured face, which now was working spasmodically. The huge fists hanging by his side kept opening and shutting in ferocious suggestion.

"By Gawd," he snarled in an even, deadly voice. "You peach on me and . . ." He came with a rush, one gnarled iron fist back to strike.

Chan-fu, rigid, unmoving, looked at him in cold contempt.

"Do not threaten, Benson," he advised in a chill, steely voice. The big man stopped, watching him fascinatedly.

Chan-fu advanced and with a stiffened finger tapped him on the chest. "If you desert me now," he promised in that icily-wicked, soft tone of his, "it will not be the police you will have to be afraid of, but me, Benson. *Me!*" The deep-set eyes shifted uneasily away from the black, agate-like ones of the Chinaman; the passion which had flamed into them, as swiftly died out. "You know me well enough," went on Chan-fu, "to be aware that in such matters I keep my word to the uttermost letter."

The voice in which the last words were uttered sent a shiver through the man before him. He stood beaten—cowed. A silence, tense, electric, fell for a moment.

"Do you *still* wish to go?" asked Chan-fu quietly.

The other shook his head in a half-stunned way.

"No," he answered in a leaden voice. "I—I ain't the one to . . . I mean, I'll stick it out, like—like I said I would."

Chan-fu smiled pleasantly.

"Quite so," was all he said, then turned again to the mantel.

"I'll get that crow-bar," Benson said.

Chan-fu nodded, then looked up suddenly.

"One moment." He stood thinking. "Where could this possibly lead to?" he asked.

Quite at a loss, Benson shook his head.

"Dunno," he replied and puzzled a moment. "Unless," he said suddenly, "it . . . By jiminy, *got* it! Ho-fang! *He* sleeps in a cellar somewhere down under this or the next room!"

"A cellar?" Chan-fu questioned sharply.

"Yus. Sleeps down underneath somewhere. I know.

Never been down t' find out where myself. The little swine ain't the invitin' kind."

"A cellar," Chan-fu repeated eagerly. "Benson, this is the only real piece of brain work you've done since I've known you."

"That where y' think the stuff might be 'id?" Benson asked, excitedly.

"I think," Chan-fu answered him after a thoughtful pause, "that we are getting decidedly nearer to it. Ho-fang," he said ruminatively. "Strange that I should have completely overlooked him in my reckonings. How does one get to the cellar?"

But at this question Benson's big head shook negatively.

"Gawd knows," he said. "If it ain't through th' dinin'-room and down them stone steps at the end of the passage, I dunno. Like I told you, I never troubled t' find out. Ain't the 'ealthiest spot to get monkeyin' about in, I shouldn't think—not with that there pet snake 'e's got. Bah!" Benson gave an involuntary shudder and then spat. "No bleedin' good to me, them things."

"Snake!" Chan-fu looked amused. "In all probability some perfectly harmless grass snake he's found in the garden."

"A yellery one, sets upon its tail, with a flat 'ead an' like a pair of eye-glasses on top of it. I on'y seen it once but that was enough for me. If it's 'armless then 'e's a flamin' liar because 'e told me one bite from it would finish a man in a minute."

"A hooded cobra," Chan-fu said musingly. "Now where did that come from, I wonder?"

"Told me the guv'nor, old Winsford, got it at Ceylon—comin' back f'om China."

At the mere mention of his hated enemy, Chan-fu's face turned to stone.

"Will Ho-fang be down there now, do you think?" he asked.

"Gawd knows where 'e's likely t' be," Benson snorted. "Anywhere as 'e ain't wanted. I ain't seen 'im for days."

"I am going down to see," Chan-fu went to the door of the dining-room. "If he should be there, I will attend to him. You get that crow-bar."

As Benson was leaving the room Chan-fu again stopped him.

"Are there some short pieces of rope to be had?" he asked.

"Plenty in the garage," Benson told him.

"Get them and bring them down to me. We may need them for Ho-fang."

For some moments nothing stirred in the desolated room. Suddenly, without sound, the panel in the mantel upright opened and the wizened face of Ho-fang peered from it. He stepped out, closing the door silently, and cautiously surveyed the room, then crossing to the window gave a long, searching look out into the garden.

Seemingly everything was as he expected to find it, for he retraced his steps and re-opened the door.

"All-li," he reported softly to someone inside; then, stooping, assisted through the aperture the girl who was called, T'mala. Behind her, and giving such support as he could in his maimed condition, came Winsford. Upon the faces of both, the ordeal of the night and morning was heavily marked—particularly in the case of the girl, who was still scarcely able to stand. Between them, Winsford and Ho-fang half-led, half carried her to the settee

and laid her down gently. Winsford looked down at her, his face haggard with anxiety.

"Brace up, old lady," he urged anxiously, chafing her hands as well as he could.

At the sideboard Ho-fang poured some brandy into a glass and brought it down to Winsford, who held it to the girl's pallid lips.

"Take a sip of this," he begged. As she did so, he smiled encouragingly. "That's better. Ho-fang, give an eye at the window there."

"All-li," responded that small worthy placidly. He went and gave his attention for the second time to the garden, but nothing of a disturbing nature meeting his eyes, returned and stood watching the pale face of the girl intently. Slowly she opened her eyes and smiled up at the young man gazing upon her fatuously; which, to judge from the expression upon his yellow face, was entirely to the satisfaction of the small, pig-tailed guardian angel of the pair. He beamed upon the pleasant scene with entire benignity.

"That's the idea," Winsford told her heartily. "Feeling better now?"

Again the wan, haggard, little smile flickered at him.

"Ever so much, thank you," she assured him; but he saw the effort behind her words, and turned away worriedly. He found himself looking straight into the leathern, wrinkled features of Ho-fang.

"Well?" he smiled.

Ho-fang drew him carefully out of earshot of the slight figure upon the wrecked settee.

"You likum pletty lady?" he inquired archly. "Ho-fang

likum plenny mluch. All-slame she velly niceey gal, Mlissie Legar'. *Hoki!*"

"Legar'?" Winsford stared at him uncomprehendingly. "Don't understand, Ho-fang. Legar'?"

"Legar-d," corrected the diminutive Chinaman, getting the final letter with a mighty effort.

Still Winsford shook his head.

"But why do you call Miss T'mala—Legarde?" he asked.

"All—slame—her name. Lit' Mlissie. Legar'. Ho-fang know."

A puzzled frown upon his forehead, Winsford went up to the girl.

"I don't know just what he's getting at," he said, "but Ho-fang has dug you up a new name. Legarde. *I* seem to know it somewhere."

"Legarde," she repeated in a whisper, that strained look coming again into her tired eyes. "Legarde? Is that my real name, Ho-fang?" She got unsteadily to her feet, holding Winsford's arm in support.

Ho-fang's face split into a cavernous grin.

"*Hoki*. All-slame Legar'. Ho-fang know you jus' lil gal. When you so blig, you clome alonga Hanoi wit' you flather, Mlisser Legar'."

"Legarde," Winsford exclaimed sharply. "Wasn't that the name of my uncle's late partner?"

"*Hoki*—she 'is lil' dlau-ter. Mlisser Winsfor' he all-slame leave you Ho-fang look after, time 'e an' Mlisser Winsfor' all-slame glo up *Thao Song Cai*. You know a mloosic all slame liver-man song? *Hoki*."

In that weird, toneless voice he chanted again his eerie song. At the first sound of it her dark eyes opened wide, her lips parted breathlessly.

"Oh, yes," she whispered eagerly, "that is the only thing I can ever remember of—of anything." Her soft appealing voice broke upon a quick sob.

"Don't!" Winsford urged quickly. "Don't! It's—it's all right now."

"Mlee tleach you that," Ho-fang hurried on. "Plenny ttime we sit on liver-bank, wlatch bloat come back, Ho-fang tleach you. Then, bimeby, mluch plenny bad mans clomes down liver at night flom Yun-nan. They all-slame sing that song. Blurnem bung'low an' go-down, kill you aymah, Hai-san, steal you 'way up liver. They all-slame killum Ho-fang too;—on'y Ho-fang mluch plenny god-dam tough—no dlle. Mluch plenny tlen, fiftee, tlousan', mlillion stabs Ho-fang—no glood—no glood! You lit' Mlissie Legar'. Ho-fang, 'e know—*Hoki!*"

Having spoken as might have the Delphic Oracle, Ho-fang the unkillable, the knight of uncountable stabs, betook himself across to the secret panel. When he reached it, Winsford, a curiously strange note in his voice, called him back.

"Ho-fang!"

"Lo?"

"Come here, I want you."

His head cocked inquiringly to one side, he came. Winsford thrust out his right hand.

"Thanks—old man," he said gravely.

For one bewildered moment, the little yellow man stared from the proffered hand to its owner. Then, lifting his own, he studied that also. Slowly, shyly, he slid it into that of the white man. With a gentle smile the girl laid one of hers upon them both. Ho-fang's mouth spread into one vast, prodigious grin.

"All-li," he observed quietly, and silently shuffled away.

"Y' know," Captain Winsford began. "Ho-fang is a remarkably sound judge. You really are a velly nicey girl. And now, Mlissie Legar'," he said, a very serious note in his voice. "We start at once. The quicker you're out of this place and in safety, the better."

"Start!" she echoed, her face paling again, "where for?"

"My aunt's place in Town."

"Now?"

"This very minute," he said determinedly. "I'll go and pack a bag. While I'm doing it, go into the other room and lock the door upon the inside. Don't open it to anyone but myself. I will knock three times—like this."

Striding over to what had been the bedroom from which Richard Winsford had watched that great panel by night, he gave three distinct knocks upon one panel.

"Just like that," he said smiling at her.

But as she passed him in the doorway, the smile went. He laid a hand gently upon her arm. She stopped and looked up at him.

"You're—you're going to marry me, T'mala?"

A soft, roseate flush came into her face.

"Am I?" she asked unsteadily.

"You—you think well of—of the idea?" he asked.

"Better than anything in the world," she whispered softly.

Slowly their lips met, lingering a moment; then she quickly entered the room and closed the door.

"Lock it," he ordered peremptorily, and waited until he heard the key turn. Then he bounded up the stairs, three at a time.

From the half-open door of the dining-room, two still, silent men saw this lover's parting, the door close, and

heard also the sharp snap of the lock when she had gone from sight. Then watched the happy lover up the stairs and out of sight.

"How did they get out of that room?" Chan-fu asked himself, a deeply graven frown between his two smouldering eyes. "How? *How?*"

"Christ!" muttered Benson through trembling lips. "I don't like the way things are goin'. I don't like it!"

A strange sound came floating up into the room. A terrible and haunting music of groaning discord and sudden notes that rang tense as human shrieks. It beat upon the air as might the cries of lost and damned souls.

As one voice both men uttered the same name: "Hofang!"

"Playin' that blasted Chineese fiddle of his," Benson breathed with a quick shudder. "I wish t' Gawd he'd stop it. I got the 'orrors enough as it is."

"Pull yourself together," Chan-fu ordered, stepping into the room. He gave that low, horrible laugh of his, then stopped abruptly. "All concerned are in this house," he said in a still, terrible voice. "*This time I will make no mistake.*"

CHAPTER XXIII

"THE BEST LAID PLANS . . ."

A GREAT, a tremendous change came over the man—the calm, impassive Chinaman vanished, to give place to a quick-moving, stealthy creature, eyes alight with a horrible blood-lust. A ravening human tiger, baulked once too often of his prey.

"Signal Peroda from that window with your handkerchief," he ordered in a whisper, then went straight to the panel door in the mantel. Some few seconds he worked at it while Benson, from outside the window, attracted the attention of the half-caste. That done, he quickly and nervously returned to Chan-fu.

"Ho-fang shall show me how to open this," Chan-fu decided grimly.

Benson, his big, fidgeting fingers showing plainly the nerve rack he was on, stared at him vacantly.

"Ho-fang?" he repeated. "That's—that's if you can get hold of him."

"I'll manage that, my good fool," Chan-fu assured him curtly.

But the other made no answer. The disquieting events of the last hours, the frustration of everything that had seemed cold certainty had broken his nerve—sapped his courage. Brave enough in his own dogged, bull-dog, against-any-odds way, this slinking, quiet dealing in uncanny effects from still more uncanny causes, was not

for him. He could not understand them—and what he could not grasp mentally, frightened him.

"I—I think," he mumbled, "that if we're wise we'll get away now—and quick!"

"No," Chan-fu said bluntly. "If we are wise, we will first get those Bonds. And my Star," he muttered fiercely. "That first—that first of all."

Again Benson stared at him in open and unavowed fear.

"But—but Barty?" he stammered, "You 'eard what 'e said."

"Barty cannot be back for twenty minutes. The three people who matter are *here*. Nothing could be better."

"What is it you want to do?"

Chan-fu gave one quick glance from that door behind which sheltered the former slave of his will, then to the curtained staircase up which Winsford had joyously ascended; from that, one long thoughtful look at that secret door which still defied him.

"Get them all here in one room," he answered.

Through the window, the Señor Peroda came hurrying. That the long wait, alone in the shrubbery, had done nothing to reduce his nervousness was very apparent. Chan-fu, detecting instantly the twitching at the corner of his mouth, the quickly-shifting, furtive movements of the usually dull, fishy eyes, decided to keep the fact of the catastrophic resurrection from that lethal chamber to himself awhile. The Señor looked too much like a man whom another unpleasant shock would cause to bolt in blind panic.

"You—you want me?" he asked jumpily.

"Stand outside that window," Chan-fu ordered him. "If anyone approaches, let me know."

"*Si—si!*"

Swiftly Peroda hurried out to his position: in some way he felt safer outside that house where dead men got up and walked again.

Chan-fu turned to Benson and nodded towards the figure of the agitated Señor keeping guard.

"Now draw those curtains," he said. "Darken the room as much as you can. And have those pieces of rope handy. We shall want them."

Benson obeyed him; then, in the dulled half-light of the room, came back and watched Chan-fu's quick, sure-fingered preparations: in his eyes he saw the devilish, implacable determination which was guiding them.

From his bag Chan-fu had taken a small phial and with expert care was steadily saturating a small pad. Benson put a whispered question.

"Chloroform?"

Chan-fu nodded.

"Yes. I could use a stronger anæsthetic, but they will wake quicker from this." He made an inclination of his head towards the door of the room in which the girl was waiting. "Get some of those ropes—then give the three knocks as he arranged. Stand well to the side of the door."

At the third knock they heard the lock spring back. Before she could make any possible movement, raise even one cry, Chan-fu was upon her, and the pad clamped over her nostrils. Benson followed him quickly into the room and the door closed noiselessly.

The door in the fireplace opened slowly. From it, Ho-fang surveyed the room. He went swiftly to the rail of the staircase and listened intently; then his eyes fixed

upon the door behind which Chan-fu and Benson were securely binding their unconscious captive.

From there he turned back to the drawn curtains of the window, drew one silently aside and looked out upon the figure of the watching Peroda. Again he stood in that rigid attitude of listening; then, suddenly, he did a strange thing. Very deliberately he made an arresting noise upon the catch of the window, then quickly turned his back and stood still—a tensed figure who seemed to be lost in some thought of his own.

Around the curtain, the head of the Señhor appeared cautiously. He, too, had been thinking his own thoughts when that sound had brought him back to realities; thoughts—not so particularly pleasant that he was not glad to be brought out of them. But he was not quite certain whether the sound he had heard was a signal from Chan-fu. Hence the cautious manner of his re-entry into the room.

The protruding eyes falling upon the still, solitary figure before him, the heart of the Señhor first bounded chokingly into his throat, and then stood still. Here indeed was a position to make a man think, and think quickly—for his own welfare! Here before him was his enemy—perhaps, of all creatures, the one he would give most to assist out of the world. Taken entirely unawares, apparently, that he could detect, unarmed, and his back most conveniently turned upon the danger threatening him. And he, Leon Peroda, *had no knife!* The hell-accursed thing was gone! From the moment he had struck down Winsford it had disappeared.

And still Ho-fang stood helpless before him; unmoving—wrapped in thought.

The Señor debated his chances. A quick clutching, strangling grip on the throat . . . yees . . . noo. If the Chinaman broke free from it . . . ? Señor Peroda drew a long quivering breath . . . Death! *La muerta!* He shivered slightly at the thought. But he would be upon the back of the other. Could not his fingers cling tight—not to be broken until . . . It occurred to him pleasantly that, once accomplished, no one would know of *this* particular death. Chan-fu or Benson were not in the room; they were gone about the business of those Bonds—the Star. None could ever, should things go wrong, point to him as the man who murdered Ho-fang. He could drag the body out into the garden and hide it. But he must be quick . . . before the other two came back to that room.

And still Ho-fang moved not one muscle.

The Señor measured the distance between him and the Chinaman. Yes, it could be done in one leap. Then cling at the throat . . . cling, cling! cling!—until not a nerve twitched in the yellow body . . . *Por Dios, si* . . . Cling on . . . no matter what—until *death!*

In one desperate leap he was on his man. A struggle short, fierce and soundless. With the fingers of the half-caste locked about his thin neck, the head of Ho-fang suddenly dropped upon his chest, his body sagged limp—like so much dead weight.

With an oath of joy at his unexpectedly easy accomplishment, the Señor dragged the small dead body towards the window and through those curtains. Murderer and his victim were lost to sight. Suddenly, from behind them there came a renewed upheaval. Frantically the hangings waved and billowed out; waved and swung from side to side, then set again into their folds—inanimate

things. One awful groan . . . then silence. Not a stir in the room . . . not one sound.

Ho-fang came from behind them, calmly wiping that broad-bladed curved knife he carried. Ten years and more since Richard Winsford had flung those two Chinese silver dollars down on the table of his bungalow verandah. It had accomplished the purpose for which the small *punkah*-boy had bought it . . . at last.

Again he crept to that door at which he had first listened, heard a warning sound, and made one dart across the room again to a big armchair by the fireplace. Into it he collapsed—the complete picture of a man in a sodden opium sleep.

Into the room Chan-fu and Benson carried the unconscious figure of the girl, bound hand and foot. They placed her in a chair.

"Get me my bag, Benson," Chan-fu ordered, lifting the girl's lids and peering into her eyes.

Stooping for it near that chair in which Ho-fang was sprawled, Benson suddenly started like a man shot.

"Gawd's truth!" he gasped sharply.

In Chan-fu's hand there suddenly glittered a revolver. He swung upon the other.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"The Chink—Ho-fang!"

Revolver cocked, Chan-fu cautiously approached and looked down upon his sleeping countryman. What he saw caused him to replace his weapon and, with a frowning forehead, lift one of Ho-fang's hands. He let it drop—it fell with a dead thud.

"Full of dope by the look of him!" Benson suggested.

Chan-fu did not at once answer. Instead, from his bag

he took a small phial; from it he filled a hypodermic syringe.

"Lift him to that chair and tie him up," he commanded.

Benson, as easily as he might have carried a baby, obeyed him. Once as, from behind, the butler passed the rope around him, Ho-fang moved slightly, then again relapsed. It was nothing—but that by a cunning twist of his thin wrists he had skilfully avoided a knot that would have rendered him utterly helpless. Entirely unconscious of it, Benson continued his work with zest—the harder and faster Ho-fang was secured, so much the better, in his opinion, for every one concerned with him.

Chan-fu, turning the sleeve of Ho-fang's tunic up, injected into his left arm a shot from his hypodermic syringe. Steadily he watched until the wizened yellow face began to show faint signs of awakening. Again he lifted the arm; this time the fingers moved spasmodically.

"Good! He will wake soon," he commented.

In the girl there were also signs of revival. Once she opened her eyes—then closed them again. From the staircase there came the sound of Winsford humming a bright little tune.

Chan-fu beckoned to Benson.

"Stand in front of the woman and mask her from sight," he whispered. "Don't move until I tell you."

At the side of the staircase, revolver in hand and hidden in the shadow of the curtains, he waited. Winsford came briskly down the steps. Upon seeing Benson standing there he stopped.

"Hullo, Benson, you blackguard," he began . . . then, at the feel of Chan-fu's revolver against his ribs, he started swiftly around.

"Oh," he said slowly. "So it's you, is it?"

Chan-fu bowed coldly.

"As you say—me. Keep that hand down by your side."

With one steady look, first at Chan-fu, then at the weapon now pointed exactly at his heart, Winsford reluctantly obeyed. The odds, he saw, were too tough for a one-handed man to take a chance. And, again, there was no sense in being shot out of hand, to leave the girl and everything else in Chan-fu's clutches.

At a sign from Chan-fu, Benson, ropes in hand, gingerly approached and, his eyes kept well away from those of the man he had betrayed, he tied him up securely. It took Winsford all his time to refrain from sending one smashing blow into the big man's face before they downed him. One expected this kind of treachery from the Chan-fus and Perodas of the world, but not from a fellow Englishman—however debased. But he took a grip upon himself and made no move—spoke no word.

"Now sit on that sofa," Chan-fu ordered.

His teeth grinding with livid rage, he was half-helped, half dragged to the settee where, for the first time, he saw the helpless position of the girl and Ho-fang. Both were well upon the way to resuscitation.

"What have you done to her?" he demanded, struggling to rise.

"She is quite all right, I assure you," Chan-fu said in his softest tone. Then added, significantly: "So far."

"If she is not," Winsford told him through gritted teeth, "my promise still holds good."

The smile Chan-fu gave him was, he thought, the most evil thing he had ever seen.

"I will remember," he said. "Now go out to the car, Benson. Things, such as may happen here, upset your

squeamish stomach, I remember. It will not take me long now to find out what I want to know."

The big man's face suddenly went a sickly white. He gave a quick shudder.

"Right," he said, keeping his eyes well away from those of the bound three. "And—and after?" He gave a trembling jerk of his head towards them.

"Have you any petrol in the garage?"

"Plenty." The voice that answered him was tremulous.

That hard, horrible laugh of Chan-fu's sounded in the room.

"Good." The wicked voice purred as he looked slowly over his prisoners. "It will help the house—and these poor fools—to burn out of all existence. Turn up those lights and—and leave me to my work."

With a trembling hand Benson pressed down the light switch and ran headlong from the room.

Without a second's pause Chan-fu addressed himself to them.

"The knowledge of where those bonds are," he said calmly, "rests with someone now in this room."

"I don't know where they are," Winsford told him equally curtly. "Neither does she."

Chan-fu listened politely, then bowed.

"Then perhaps my esteemed countryman may have some knowledge," he said. From his pocket he took what resembled a small pair of pliers, horrible little glittering things, Winsford saw, that, in his hands, looked capable of any devilry. "He may know," Chan-fu proceeded leisurely, "and if he does, I *think* I can persuade him to speak."

"You're not going to torture Ho-fang with those things?" Winsford cried indignantly.

Chan-fu looked at him with lifted eyebrows.

"Torture?" he repeated inquiringly, "We Orientals would scarcely speak of the drawing of a few finger nails as torture. Painful—exceedingly; but a very elementary form of a thing we Chinese first reduced to an exact science, then raised to a fine art."

Winsford felt himself going sick. There was something too utterly appalling in the way this cold-blooded devil was practically licking his lips over the hellish work he proposed to do.

"You dam'd wicked swine!" he hissed. "You cold-blooded devil!"

Again Chan-fu bowed pleasantly.

"Devil," he repeated. "Precisely. And *how* devilish you little dream! You asked was I going to put Ho-fang to the torture," he continued evenly, but his glance swept the small prisoner with unspeakable contempt. "Why should I waste time and trouble with a low-born dog such as he? I—the Excellency Chan-fu." He raised his head proudly.

"He's a greater credit to his country than ever you're likely to be," Winsford snapped at him.

"That may be," Chan-fu agreed urbanely. "But you do not know my countrymen as I do. Ho-fang would just sit there and die in silence. Torture would not make a Chinaman speak." The cruel, stony eyes settled upon the girl. "No, there is a simpler way to make him talk than that." Slowly, inexorably, he approached her.

From Ho-fang there came quick, guttural volley in his own tongue.

Chan-fu swung around upon him.

"Speak English, dog," he commanded.

"All-li." Still and impassive the little figure sat, his

black slanting, inscrutable eyes fixed straight before him. "You all-slame kill her," he pointed out, "no good. She not know; no can say."

With a gesture of contempt Chan-fu dismissed him. He turned upon the girl again, the horrible little instrument glinting in his hand.

"You show her no mlercy?" Ho-fang asked again.

The answer was final—implacable.

"None whatever."

"All-li. Ho-fang speak. I show you. Firs', you all-slame set me flee."

Chan-fu mocked at him.

"When I have them—not before."

From the girl came a sharp, imploring cry.

"Don't speak, Ho-fang! Don't speak!"

"Yes," came almost simultaneously from Winsford.

"Tell, Ho; *tell!* Dam' the things!"

Ho-fang nodded gravely.

"I speak," he said. Fixedly the two Chinamen watched each other, in Chan-fu's eyes a flame of triumph. Those of the coolie showed nothing of any emotion or passion—just blank impassivity. "You glo' fi'place," he directed.

Quickly Chan-fu obeyed him. "Here?" he asked, when at the secret door.

Ho-fang shook his head.

"No. To stool—in blott'm fi'place."

"This?"

"*Hoki*. You kneel. Feel loun' top-side. Fin' lil' bluttin'."

Five seconds later Chan-fu's exultant cry of success came. "I have it!"

"Pless 'ard. Mluch plenny 'ard."

The top of the stool swung round revealing the interior.

"And now?" Chan-fu demanded.

"An' nlow," Ho-fang told him quietly, "You plush arm ddown insi' stool. Mluch plenny down—long way."

"At last!" Chan-fu exclaimed.

"Far down," Ho-fang said in the same quiet tone. "Long way."

Silently, fascinatedly the other two watched; but in Ho-fang it seemed to raise no interest. He just sat there, still as ever, eyes staring before him.

And as they watched there suddenly came from Chan-fu a low and awful cry. His exultant face changed slowly to a strange quivering distortion. In colour it turned to a dead white mask. Slowly he raised himself, and, with an even slower action, withdrew that buried hand and arm from the stool. Fastened to it, and coiled about his bare arm and wrist was a small cobra. Its hood was spread in vicious anger, and again and again it drove its terrible poison fangs into Chan-fu's hand. With another terrible cry he tore it from him and cast it down upon the floor. Hissing savagely it writhed across the carpet, and made its way back to its hiding place.

In a low, choking voice Chan-fu spoke.

"A cobra. It has bitten me."

To which the small Chinaman answered quietly: "*Hoki*—you dlie."

Slowly the lean figure straightened up to its full height.

"*Hoki*," he answered quietly, and for the first time in his own tongue. "I die."

Stoic and fatalist, he stood swaying, waiting for death to overtake him. Once he turned his head and spoke, again in the Chinese to Ho-fang. Quietly the little man answered him.

With a quick turn of his wrists, Ho-fang slipped the ropes from him, got up and stood by Chan-fu. In his

open palm was the incomparable lost Red Star of Yun-nan.

A trembling hand reached out and took it reverently; a dying man pressed it to his lips. One long sighing moan came from Chan-fu, then he lurched backwards, caught his balance again for a long moment, then went down in a sprawling heap. A quick convulsion of the body . . . then stillness.

"He all-li now," Ho-fang told them in a hushed voice. "He dlie, all-slame, alonga his Stlar. Make plenny glood fliend his Joss. Mluch plenny bad man, Chan-fu; but no good him dlie an' his Joss, him angly. No good—no good. All-li now."

With quick fingers he released the others. From outside there came the hail of the returning Captain Barty: a moment later he was in the room, followed by a well-nigh exhausted Mr. Herrington.

At the sight that met them they pulled up; words frozen upon their lips.

"Good God!" ejaculated the lawyer when he recovered his voice. "What's happened here?"

In a few hurried words Winsford explained.

"Then you haven't got the bonds after all!" Captain Barty breathed aghast.

"I haven't got them and never did have them," Winsford told him.

The small figure of Ho-fang insinuated itself into the circle.

"Blonds?" he inquired. "You wantum blonds—all-slame blonds Mateo steal?"

A chorus of anxious affirmatives greeted him.

"All-li!" He shed an horrific beam upon them all and quietly produced them from one of his capacious sleeves. "Ho-fang, him keepum safe all-tlime."

Recovered from his wild, almost lunatic manifestation of delight, Captain Barty looked down upon the still body of Chan-fu.

"I—I say, y' know, there's another fortune in that thing in his hands—what!"

But again the little figure of Ho-fang intervened.

"You no tlouch," he said impressively. "No good you take-um what bl'onga his Joss! Chan-fu Joss mluh plenny pow'ful. Him angly. Chan-fu no can help. You takeum that, Chan-fu no sleep in glave—no can lest qliet. Him spilit not lay still—do mluh plenny harm. No good—no good. Mlisser Winsfor' 'e take—'e dlie. You take—you no be 'appy notime. We tlake Chan-fu bloody, plenny qlick an' puttem before he Joss. Give black Joss his Star. Then Chan-fu 'appy alonga 'ese flathers. *Hoki. Hoki.*"

"Speaking as a legal man," Mr. Herrington said quietly, "I'll say that's the best advice you could possibly have been given. Get the body out of here at once. There's no need to make a mouthful of this business for the papers. I'll go straight up to Town and negotiate these bonds at once."

"Perhaps," Winsford asked anxiously, "you'd take Miss Legarde up with you. This house is no place for her . . . not for a while."

Alone in the house, the three men raised the body of the dead Mandarin and bore it, carefully covered, to Barty's car.

"You clome back get other feller," Ho-fang invited them serenely.

"Other fellow!" Winsford stared at him in horror. "There isn't another one dead, is there?"

"*Hoki!* Peloda, him goddam plenny dlead. I flix 'im!"

At the sight behind the curtains both white men turned away, sickened. The unfortunate wretch had been literally

split as might be a carcass hanging in a butcher's shop.

"Me lap him up and cally him," Ho-fang volunteered cheerfully, after a surprised glance at the faces of the others. "I wait tlen year for him—do plenny glood job when I glet 'im. *Hoki!*"

"Y' know, Winnie," said Captain Barty, glancing hurriedly at an evening paper whose captions screamed at the reader a report of a tremendous and fatal explosion which had occurred about midday at the house of a Chinese scientist on Barnes Common, "we had a deuced lucky squeak—if you ask me. Half an hour later smuggling those bodies in, and we'd have gone up with the rest."

"It seems a strange dispensation of Fate," Winsford answered seriously, "that what he had undoubtedly meant to be my funeral pyre—and hers—should have been his own. However, there's one good end to it. No one will ever have the slightest suspicion of how they really came by their death. What does it say about it there?"

Captain Barty turned again to the paper.

"Just says," he answered, "that the firemen found several charred and unrecognizable bodies in the ruins, one of which was believed to be the eminent scientist Doctor Chan-fu, himself."

"Poor misguided man," said Winsford generously. "We'll hope he's at peace with his Joss at last."

"What about Benson?" asked Barty. "He's got clean away, hasn't he?"

"Let him go," Winsford said abruptly. "He was no good but—but I can't forget he was the only one to stick up for T'mala before she was put in that hellish cabinet."

"An unfaithful swine," Captain Barty declared forcibly.

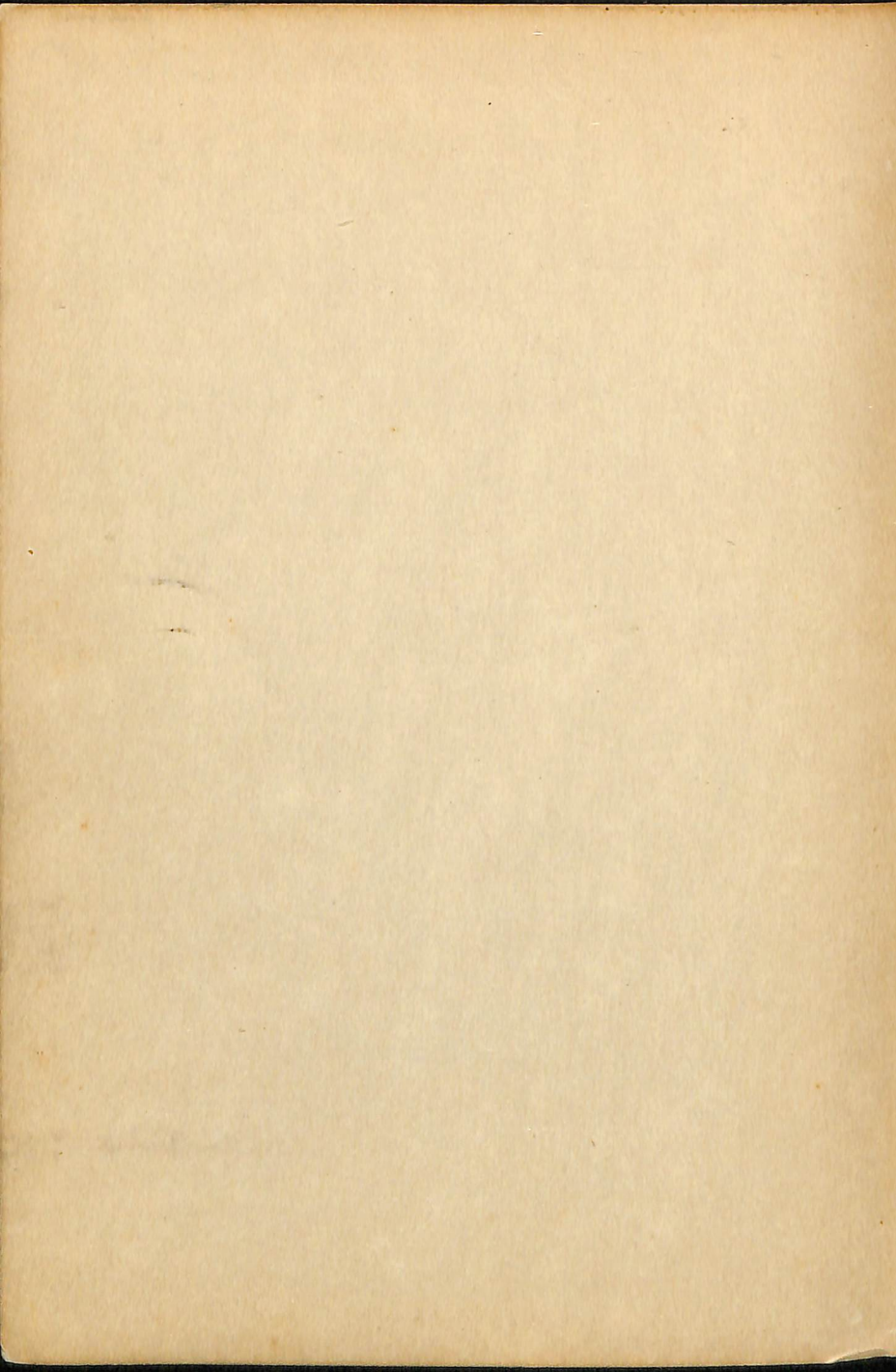
Winsford thought a moment.

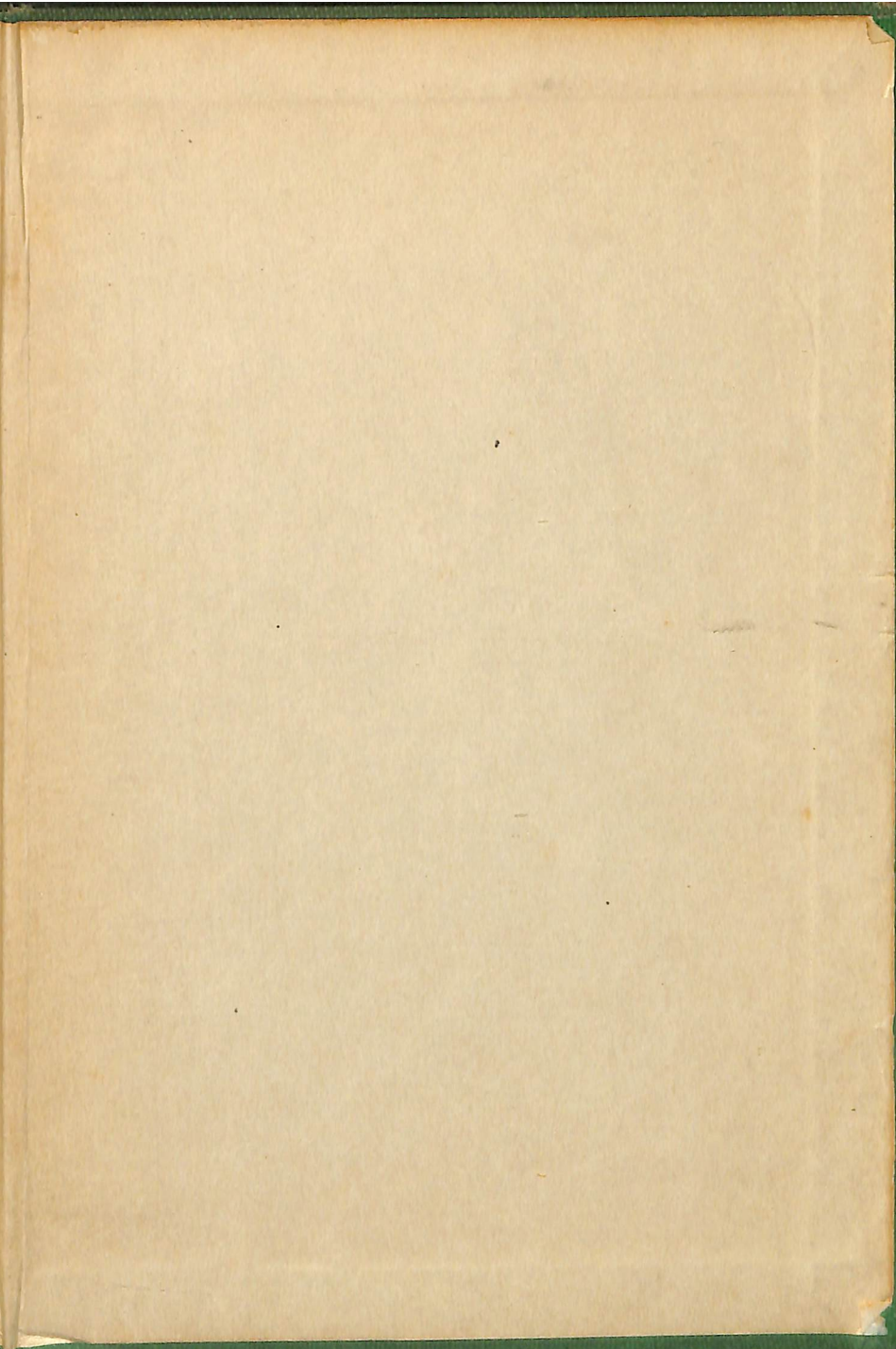
"We don't know," he returned quietly. "None of us know what's at the bottom of any man's actions. He wasn't bad right through, like Peroda. And, anyhow, he was dog-faithful to Chan-fu. We'll give him the benefit of the doubt—and let him go."

"I s'pose," Captain Barty put tentatively, "you'll be marryin' in the spring?"

"Don't talk drivels," responded his friend promptly. "I don't hold with this putting off things to the last minute. 'Do it now!' is my motto. Besides, this spring stuff is terribly overdone. What's the matter with a fortnight from to-day?"

"What, indeed!" returned Captain Barty, and turned wearily to the sporting page of the paper.







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